



# The AMERICAN MONASTIC NEWSLETTER

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*The mission of the American Monastic Newsletter is to be an instrument of communication and information for monastic communities in the Benedictine tradition in North America, members of the American Benedictine Academy, and other interested persons.*

## *In Memory of Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB*

For decades, Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, a sister of Mount St. Benedict in Erie, Penn., has been a highly recognized face among Benedictine peacemakers. She died Jan. 6 at the age of 81 after living with cancer for some time, determined to live every day as fully as she could until the end.

An Erie native, she spent some 60 years as a Benedictine, initially as a teacher and, for a short time, as a reporter for *Erie Daily Times*. But her true passion was for bringing the world to greater peace and justice in ways large and small. She earned both bachelor and master's degrees in peace studies and taught the subject at a number of schools and in workshops across the country.

In 1981, her monastery's Benet Press published her landmark book, *Peace Is Our Calling: Contemporary Monasticism and the Peace Movement*. In it, she called upon Benedictines to recognize and act upon their role as peacemakers in a troubled and violent world. She studied, traveled and conducted interviews to explore what was meant by "Benedictine peace" and how its practitioners and contemporary peace and justice movements could contribute to one another.

She was an inspiration at the many demonstrations and prayer services that she attended and was arrested 13 times for her participation. She helped form Benedictines for Peace, an organization with networking and representation in women's and men's monasteries across the country, and served as its national coordinator from 1980 to 1985. At home, she was a strong presence in the urban neighborhood where she herself had been raised. She was one of the founders of Emmaus Ministries Soup Kitchen, Erie's Inner-City Neighborhood Art House, and Poetry Park, a neighborhood garden and green space that includes a stage, aluminum sculptures, and painted poetry murals. She herself was a published poet, as well.

She knew the importance of communicating the Benedictine message and was a founding and sustaining presence at Benetvision and Monasteries of the Heart. Her own faith and optimism persisted throughout her life. Once asked by the editor of this newsletter whether all this peacemaking was really getting anywhere, she answered with her gentle smile, "Perhaps if we weren't praying, we'd have already blown ourselves up." We carry on.

## President's Message

Greetings, ABA members and friends!

We now enter our 75th year as the American Benedictine Academy. During the holidays, I reviewed some of the past newsletters and addresses by past presidents regarding the mission of the ABA.

Alberta Dieker, OSB, in her *American Benedictine Review* article "Ideas and Ideals: The American Benedictine Academy, 1948-1998," chronicles the 50-year history of the ABA. It is a good read on the history of the ABA and its achievements. As we move on in history, Mary Forman, O.S.B., ABA past president (1996-1998), refers to an article that holds true to our mission statement then and now, which is to cultivate, support, and transmit the Benedictine heritage within contemporary culture. The Academy sponsors and promotes disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research, writing and collaboration among its members. It serves as a catalyst inviting men and women to ponder creatively and to discuss the challenges to Benedictine values.

The article Mary Forman, OSB, refers to in her President's Message (October 1996 Newsletter) is by Patricia Mische, then head of Global Education Associates ("Sisters Today" 67:3, May 1995, 164). It is a good analogy of where we as the ABA have been and what we face today. Patricia Mische writes: "The future will bring a new world order. That much is certain. But there is no certainty about what kind of world order, based on what values, with whom in the leadership, or how we get there. ... Much depends on how we who live now discern and act on the new



### ***The AMERICAN MONASTIC NEWSLETTER***

Submit any announcements or articles to:

Editor: Judith Sutera, OSB

Mount St. Scholastica, 801 S. 8th, Atchison, KS 66002

Email: [jsutera@mountosb.org](mailto:jsutera@mountosb.org)

For all address changes, membership payments, or any other ABA business, please contact the ABA secretary:

Email: [abacadsec@gmail.com](mailto:abacadsec@gmail.com)

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signs of the times. We have to imagine and will the future we want for the children of the 21st century, and commit ourselves to bring it into being. This commitment in turn depends greatly on our images of hope and sense of possibility for efficacious action. The period 1995 to 2000 offers special opportunities, for effective action." Mary Forman, OSB, in her message, addressed the challenges of moving forward into the 21st century.

As we moved into the 21st century, ABA past president (2012-2014) Martin Shannon (Community of Jesus), in his address to convention attendees on August 4, 2012, said: "The ABA was founded in 1947 with the purpose 'to cultivate, support, and transmit the Benedictine heritage in contemporary culture' and, especially in the field of research and scholarship, it energetically fulfilled its purpose. Then in 1982, the Academy, recognizing that the tradition was evolving and expanding, extended its borders to include 'anyone who had a serious interest in Benedictinism.' This was the same year that, as a Presbyterian pastor, I began graduate work at Princeton Seminary . . . in monastic studies. That's right -- Princeton Seminary and monastic studies. My interest in monasticism had been growing for some years, largely due to my deepening connection with the Community of Jesus, an ecumenical, monastic community on Cape Cod. Founded by two Episcopal laywomen in the early 1960s, the Community of Jesus is a mixed community of families and celibate men and women, about 275 of us altogether, whose life of prayer, work and fellowship is firmly rooted in the Benedictine tradition." Martin's address, in summary, chronicles some of the changes we see as we move forward into the future. (<http://archive.osb.org/aba/news/2012/octa.html#pres>).

As we move forward in this 75th year, we need to ask ourselves where we go from here. Are we following our mission statement as an academy? I welcome comments and suggestions as how we can improve ABA or if we need to re-evaluate what is our purpose/mission. We are also looking for information, suggestions, possible articles on the Liturgy of the Hours, and notable liturgists we should recognize during the convention year 2024. Please contact me at [greg.evans.oblsb@me.com](mailto:greg.evans.oblsb@me.com).

Gregory Evans  
ABA president

## CANON LAW COLUMN

### *New Developments from Rome regarding changes in governance for religious institutes, et al.*

Most of us are aware of various religious communities, including Benedictine communities, which have shrunk in size and now have many aging members. Yet those communities desire to continue living their monastic life with authenticity, and realize they cannot do as in the past. Things are different, there is a shrinking pool of personnel for leadership, as well as of the membership as a whole who can think through and discern issues of importance in the monastery. So, how does the regular governance of a superior, council and chapter continue in a monastery when there are not sufficient numbers with the ability to carry the load of self-governance?

In recent years, the presidents of the women's monastic congregations in this country, after much research and consultation, wrote a handbook on the modification and suspension of regular governance in their monasteries, entitled, "Guidelines for the Modification and Suspension of Regular Governance in Autonomous Monasteries." At the regular meeting of the Conference of Benedictine Prioresses (CBP) in February 2020, it was presented and approved. It is intended as a guide for those monasteries that find they are no longer able to carry on the regular canonical governance of the monastery. It has been followed, more or less, by some monasteries in our monastic congregations, and has not yet been tried in others. It is intended as a document to be studied and pondered and this has been done. But it is only a beginning point.

It has become clear that the canonical norms for regular governance of a monastery, as well as for other religious communities, are no longer sufficient to meet today's and tomorrow's needs. This has become more and more evident. We learned recently that the Vatican Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life has also seen the evidence of the need to shift and change in order to better serve the religious institutes with which it is charged to "promote, encourage and regulate" the institutes of consecrated life (*Apostolic Constitution Praedicate Evangelium*, 19 March 2022).

As a result of this recognition of the current insufficiency of canonical norms for institutes, the dicastery began to invite, by language group, heads of conferences of major superiors to come to Rome

in order to seek their input on the current status of religious life and what the needs are. In December 2022, leadership from the various English-speaking conferences of leadership of women and men religious was invited to Rome, which included the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), Conference of Major Superiors of Women, and Conference of Major Superiors of Men in the United States.

In a recent online meeting, the leadership of LCWR shared with its members the highlights of this meeting. (See January 2023 *LCWR Update*, p. 4.) According to the recent LCWR newsletter, this was an "unprecedented gathering among 10 English-speaking canonical conferences of men and women religious throughout the world and members of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life as part of the International Rome Congress for Religious Issues related to vocations, as well as continuance and governance within the context of today's challenges and opportunities, were central to the dialogue." It was noted that other language groups of leadership conferences have already been held or will be held soon.

The most important and encouraging message I heard from the LCWR leadership as they shared their experience of that meeting is that the Vatican dicastery is cognizant of these new realities and wants to respond in a way that is helpful. The dicastery staff acknowledged that the existing juridic structures are inadequate.

The leadership of the dicastery expressed gratitude for the leadership conferences that were represented at this meeting in Rome, and thanked them specifically for sending ahead of time reports about their conferences so that dicastery staff could prepare for the gathering. Archbishop Carballo of the dicastery said that they saw in the reports that were sent ahead of time signs of hope, passion and vision. It was evident during the meeting, both among dicastery staff members and those representing the leadership conferences, that there is a trust present that TOGETHER they will seek to build new structures that will be responsive to the needs of the time. Dicastery staff said openly and clearly that there is no option that will be off the table – the dicastery is open to new possibilities. The metaphor of flying a plane was used – we, the dicastery and religious together, are building a plane as we are flying it. Several times

throughout the meeting participants commented on the fact this is synodality in action.

Clearly these were not empty words, as the next gathering of English-speaking leadership conferences and the dicastery has already been scheduled for March 30, 2023.

The dicastery has been asked for a period of experimentation during which religious congregations would be able to creatively and intentionally experiment with governance and formation. Agility and flexibility will be needed by us all. We will see what comes at the spring meeting in Rome.

Lynn McKenzie, OSB  
Sacred Heart Monastery  
Cullman, AL 35055  
lynnmckenzieosb@gmail.com



I am pleased to announce that I have been awarded a 2023 Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Award through the “Minnesota State Arts Board Creative Support for Individuals” grant program. This funds me to develop workshops to engage older adults living with dementia in creative writing processes, in two formats for two audiences: in person for people living in care facilities; and online for unpaid dementia family caregivers.

For the past three years, I have been gathering Benedictines who engage in healing practices and/or arts practices, to probe questions around a 21st-century Benedictine vision of hospitality. How might we collaborate to bring healing hospitality to individuals living in a violent, divisive world, reliant on an industrialized healthcare system that is too often a source of economic development and profit, corrupted by greed?

Since 2018, I also have been working with a diverse collective of poets and artists through Lyricality, a grass-roots non-profit organization with an antiracist mission to support each other in a companionship of mutual empowerment. We are building our individual and collective capacity to engage with people, organizations, and communities in art-making, in trauma-sensitive ways that foster trust and authenticity. My creative writing and creative process workshops and courses

are continually evolving, informed by ongoing conversations with Benedictines, poets, writers, and artists.

At its core, my artistic and organizational work outside the monastery translates principles from the *Rule of St. Benedict* and monastic tradition into the secular language of neuroscience, to offer Benedictine wisdom to people who have been harmed by encounters with Christian colonialism and/or toxic, spiritually destructive leadership, who are therefore resistant to and/or re-traumatized by theological language.

These new workshops will incorporate insights gleaned while writing my collection of poems, *Still Life, Broken and Repaired* (Lyricality Press, 2023) and my forthcoming essay collection, *When Things Fall Asunder – Stories and Practices for Nonviolent Living During Chaotic Times*. Both books offer a Benedictine perspective on joy, serenity, and grief in a marriage transformed by memory loss. The essays also explore how our stories can activate fear, mistrust, and hatred, as well as how to revise them into more complex and nuanced stories, fostering empathy, compassion, and understanding to support healing for ourselves, others, and our planet.

I am grateful to many Benedictine and writer/artist conversation partners, including all the Studium scholars who have enlightened my work, the sisters and oblates of Saint Benedict’s Monastery for supporting my husband and me, and the ABA for enriching my journey toward this milestone achievement.

*Tracy Rittmueller (OblSB) is a poet/writer, teaching artist, member of ABA, and Studium Scholar at Saint Benedict’s Monastery in St. Joseph, Minn. She is also the Executive Director of Lyricality where she is facilitating a 2-year process to implement sustainable, decentralized co-leadership, inspired by her monastery’s Spirituality Center / Studium Directors’ example. TracyRittmueller.org | Lyricality.org*

All ABA memberships run concurrent to the calendar year, regardless of when the membership began. If you’re reading this online or in a library and wondering why you didn’t receive a copy, chances are your membership expired. Please check the current 2023 member list on page 11, renew soon and encourage new members to join. Payment may be made by mail or by using the Paypal link on the membership page of the website.

# COMING EVENTS

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## INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON MEDIEVAL STUDIES

May 10-13

The ICMS has been the premier worldwide gathering of people from every branch of medieval studies for 58 years in Kalamazoo, Mich. Among the hundreds of sessions, the American Benedictine Academy and Cistercian Studies will host sessions, as will other related organizations and academic groups on topics related to the literature, saints, spirituality and material culture of medieval monasticism. The full program for the week-long event is available at Western Michigan's website (<https://wmich.edu/medievalcongress>).

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## SAINT MEINRAD SEMINARY AND SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY "The Desert Fathers and Mothers" May online with residency June 5-9

Saint Meinrad's Graduate Theology Program is offering a 3-credit graduate intensive course on The Desert Fathers and Mothers with Dr. Robert Porwoll this summer, beginning online May 1, with residency June 5-9, 2023. Those wishing to take the course should apply for non-degree student status by March 15. More information is available at [www.saintmeinrad.edu/graduate-theology/how-to-apply](http://www.saintmeinrad.edu/graduate-theology/how-to-apply).

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## COMMUNICATING RELIGIOUS LIFE International Union of Superiors General (UISG) Online Seminar - November 27-30

UISG has launched the topic, graphic materials, and agenda for the events in preparation of the First International Meeting for Communication in Religious Life. The meeting will take place online from November 27-30, 2023. The title chosen for the program is "Communicating Religious Life," whereas the slogan will be "At Your Word we will cast the nets. We will tell the whole world about You."

In one of the reflections offered during the launching webinar, Dr. Paolo Ruffini, Prefect of the Dicastery for Communication, shared: "Religious women (and also religious men of course) can help the whole Church to weave through communication a network that is not only content to connect, but that translates the Gospel message into the multimedia world without erasing the histories and cultures of each country and the specificity of each language."

The invitation to take part in November's meeting is addressed not only to consecrated men and women, but also to lay people who, taking up the congregations' charism, communicate their mission putting their professional skills to good use. More information at: [www.uisg.org/en/news/We-communicate-the-heart-of-Religious-Life](http://www.uisg.org/en/news/We-communicate-the-heart-of-Religious-Life).

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## MANAGEMENT TRAINING FOR TODAY'S MONASTIC LEADERS Sant'Anselmo - Rome July 2-15

Unprecedented developments are changing our monasteries and making leadership much more demanding. Outside pressures, inside challenges and cultural changes are making monastic leaders wonder:

- who can help us to understand, distinguish and decide?
- what approaches and tools are available to help us deal with these challenges?
- how can we initiate in good time needed changes without losing our identity?

"Leadership and the Rule of Saint Benedict" is a joint educational project of the universities of St. Gallen in Switzerland and Sant'Anselmo in Rome. We have assembled a faculty of international experts and experienced leaders from the Benedictine family who will help you to frame the challenges facing your monastery and show pragmatic ways to handle them. About 150 people have completed the course. By the end of the program, you will be equipped to shape your best response to those challenges. Details at: [www.collegiosantanselmo.com/curia-del-ordine-benedettino/leadership-and-the-rule-of-saint-benedict](http://www.collegiosantanselmo.com/curia-del-ordine-benedettino/leadership-and-the-rule-of-saint-benedict)

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*CIB – the heart of international Benedictine women:  
The history moves forward*

Being a part of *Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum* (CIB – it's quite a mouthful in Latin, so, we usually simply speak out the letters C-I-B.) has been a life transforming experience! I first attended a CIB Symposium at Sant'Anselmo Abbey on the Aventine Hill in Rome in 2014, just a few months after I was first elected president of the Monastic Congregation of St. Scholastica. I had gone to Rome in 1994 with my graduating canon law class from Catholic University of America and never expected to travel to Rome again. Now, I am not sure how many times I have been! It has been a privilege.

At that symposium, I met Benedictine women from around the world. Fortunately for me, the primary language of CIB is English, but I heard many languages spoken there – the expected European and Central and South American languages, but also African and Asian languages. What an incredible experience for this small town Alabama girl!

Especially in our ancient Benedictine world, the CIB is quite young – technically only founded in 2001, though its roots of being an international organization for Benedictine women reach back to 1965. In the introduction to her seminal work, *The Founding of the Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum 1965-2009*, Sister Scholastika Häring quoted the CIB statutes which give an important context for understanding CIB: “The one common charism, embraced by those who have lived according to the Rule of St. Benedict for 15 centuries, has been implanted and enculturated in all parts of the world to this day. This revered and ancient tradition continues to flourish and be a source of vitality in the church.”

Sister Scholastika's doctoral dissertation in this important work contains “the canonical development of the relationships among communities of Benedictine women as well as their relationship to the Benedictine Confederation (of men) and thus traces the steps that over the years led to the foundation of the CIB in its current canonical form.”

Sister Scholastika's dissertation was first published in her native German tongue. Not long afterward, it was translated into English by American Benedictine Marianne Burkhard (Rock Island, Ill.). It found its ways to the printed page through the expertise and generosity of Judith Sutera (Atchison, Kan.), the esteemed long-time editor of this newsletter.

Last year, this same work was translated into French and published for the many French speaking Benedictines by Sister Christine Conrath of Jouarre Abbey in France, who currently serves as the executive secretary of the Alliance for International Monasticism (AIM) located in Paris. This year it was translated into Spanish by M. Concha Galán de Mera of Monasterio de la Ascensión in Zamora, Spain, the editor of the Spanish language scholarly monastic journal, *Nova et Vetera*. The Spanish language translation was only recently published for the many Spanish speaking *Benedictinas*. These two languages of French and Spanish account for the languages of many countries and many monasteries in various parts of the world.

These translations are an important way for the story of CIB to be known, not only among Benedictine women themselves but also for all those who are connected to Benedictine monastic life around the globe. We hope that in the future this seminal work will also find its way into other languages – perhaps, for example, Korean. In the small country of South Korea there are over 1,000 Benedictine women!

This history is important, but so is all that has happened since 2009 when Sister Scholastika's research ended. It is important at the current time, as the CIB is looking closely at its current non-juridic structure and is beginning to make decisions about how to make CIB even more accessible and serviceable to all Benedictine women. We shall see whether the CIB might become a parallel structure to the Benedictine Confederation of men, which is led by the abbot primate. While the abbot primate technically does not have jurisdiction over Benedictine men's monasteries (See the canon law column in the February 2009 issue of this newsletter), he does serve as an important link of Benedictine monks with the Holy See. Perhaps in the future, the elected leader of the CIB will also become such a recognized important link of communication between Benedictine women and the Vatican. Stay on the lookout to see what other languages in which the historical-canonical development of the CIB will be published.

Lynn McKenzie, OSB

Sacred Heart Monastery, Cullman, Alabama

*The author currently serves as the Moderator of Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum and also as the president of the Monastic Congregation of St. Scholastica which has 17 monasteries in the USA and Mexico.*



In recent elections, Sister Hannah Winkler, CSM, was elected prioress at St. Mary's [Episcopal Benedictines] (Sewanee, Tenn.). Sister Mary Bratrsovsky, OSB was re-elected to continue her service as prioress at Sacred Heart Monastery (Lisle, Ill.).

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Dear Sisters & Brothers,

Please hold in prayer all who are suffering from the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria that occurred on Monday, February 6. We have a Cistercian monastery, Fons Pacis, in Syria. I wrote to Mother Marta and received the following response:

“We are well, thanks to God. The earthquake was very strong in our region. All the walls were moving and the lamps, etc. and for a really long time. But there aren't serious problems for our building at this moment.

“But for Syria, it is a big disaster. Some places like Aleppo, Lattakie, and also Tartous and Homs were severely damaged. A lot of buildings fell down, a lot of people under the pieces of concrete, etc. It rains. It is very cold. People are in the street, they cannot go home for the concern of other quakes.

“If you write anything, please tell the people: NOW REALLY IS THE TIME TO TAKE AWAY THE SANCTIONS TO SYRIA!! It is the minimum at this moment. Pray for the Syrian people. Thank you so much.”

Sister Ann Hoffman, OSB  
Director AIM USA  
345 E. 9 St. Erie, PA 16503 USA  
814 453-4724  
director@aim-usa.org

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The Archivists for Communities of Women Religious (ACWR) is embarking on its first major grant-funded initiative this year with a Collaborative Archives grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission of the National Archives. Over the next two years, they will connect both women religious and diocesan archives

to resources and best practices for processing their respective Catholic Native boarding school collections with the primary goal of increasing access to Native communities who are seeking information about their own tribe's history or their ancestors. Out of this sharing, NHPRC will produce a collection guide to Catholic Native American Boarding School collections in the US, where participants will submit a finding aid based on a collective template created for this project. They envision the final product to be similar, albeit much more lengthy in the individual responses, to the ACWR Women Religious Resource Directory, providing Native communities and scholars with a collective resource on previously largely undiscoverable material.

A portion of the funding for this project includes stipends to fund the time and supplies necessary to organize and produce the finding aid for their collections. There is still time to connect with this project if any community has Catholic Native boarding school collections and is interested in participating. Please reach out to the ACWR National Office for more information: [archivistsacwr@gmail.com](mailto:archivistsacwr@gmail.com).

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The Benedictine Abbots and Prioresses of North America met for a joint meeting in Cullman, Alabama, from February 3-6. The abbots stayed at the retreat center at St. Bernard Abbey and the prioresses at the retreat center at Sacred Herat Monastery, both in Cullman.

The abbots and prioresses, along with the presidents of their monastic congregations, held separate business meetings and came together for shared presentations. Abbot Primate Gregory Polan, OSB, spoke about lessons learned during and after the pandemic and gave his customary report on the athenaeum and college at Sant'Anselmo.

Presentations at the joint meeting focused on care of the sick within monasteries. Brother John Mark Falkenhain, OSB, a monk of St. Meinrad Archabbey, addressed mental health concerns and a team of caregivers from Mount St. Scholastica Monastery in Atchison, Kan., talked about the various forms of dementia and care of the dying. The team included Sister Esther Fangman, prioress, and Renee Porter and Stacey Davis from the community's Dooley Center care facility.

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The annual meeting of Benedictine Priors took place at St. Louis Abbey in Missouri from Thursday, November 3, 2022 through Sunday, November 6, 2022. Father Earl Henry, OSB, a seasoned claustral prior from St. Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, was the keynote presenter. As part of the schedule, the claustral priors visited the Cathedral-Basilica in St. Louis. The cathedral is known for its large mosaic installation (which is one of the largest in the Western Hemisphere), and for its burial crypts. The cathedral was designated a basilica by Pope John Paul II in 1997.

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The Alliance for International Monasticism (AIM USA) has launched its annual Lenten appeal with the following beneficiaries: nuns in Togo to build storage for the conservation of bulbs and onions to help the community; sisters in Nigeria to make vestments on a larger and faster embroidery machine; monk from Cuernavaca, Mexico to attend Sant'Anselmo's Liturgical Institute to train as a monastic musician; the Center of Monastic Spirituality in Nigeria to offer a two month program for 20 men and women monastics; monk from Brazil to attend a course in monastic studies at Sant'Anselmo's. To find out more or make donations, go to [www.AIM-USA.org](http://www.AIM-USA.org).

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Saint Benedict Center in Schuyler, Nebraska, is offering a five-week Lenten online retreat, on the ancient practices of *lectio divina* (sacred reading) and *visio divina* (sacred seeing) using illuminations and Lenten liturgical passages from *The Saint John's Bible* to deepen the Lenten journey. The movement through the steps of these practices engages the heart, mind, and spirit, as we sit together in periods of silence, reading, gazing, reflecting, prayer, and contemplation. We seek to have the Lord awaken "the ears and eyes of our hearts." Those participating in this retreat will be invited to share how the Holy Spirit has spoken to their hearts through these presentations of readings and illuminations.

The presenter is Steven Blum, PhD, a Benedictine Oblate who has served as a dean in the Benedictine Oblates of Nebraska community affiliated with Sacred Heart Monastery in Yankton, S.D. Register for this free program at [retreats@StBenedictCenter.com](mailto:retreats@StBenedictCenter.com).

## ABA ESSAY CONTEST

Each convention year, the ABA sponsors an essay contest exploring topics related to the Benedictine tradition and charism. This contest is aimed at inspiring writing among newer community members and is open to monastics and oblates who have made their first profession or oblation within the past 10 years.

**Details regarding theme and requirements for participation will appear in future issues of this newsletter leading up to the 2024 convention.**

### Prize:

A two-year membership in the American Benedictine Academy  
Waiver of registration and hospitality fees for the 2024 ABA convention  
A book of interest for monastics/oblates  
The possibility of having one's essay published in a relevant publication

## RECORDINGS OF CONVENTION PRESENTATIONS

The ABA has recordings of each of the 2022 convention presentations at a cost of \$8 per video DVD or \$5 for audio only CD (includes shipping), or \$2 each for digital mp4 files.

Sister Laura Swan, OSB – "The World of the Desert Ascetics"

Rev. Dr. Donald Richmond, Oblate – "The Fool with Words"

Sister Mary Forman, OSB – "Give me a word ... Lectio divina and the Sayings and Lives of the Desert"

Please specify format and desired talks, and send with payment (checks should be made to Sister Judith, not to ABA) to:

Judith Sutera, OSB  
801 So. 8th St.  
Atchison, KS 66002  
[jsutera@mountosb.org](mailto:jsutera@mountosb.org)

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Coenobium: Reflections on Monastic Community* by Michael Casey, OCSO (Cistercian Publications, 2021) 212 pp., \$19.95, ISBN 9780879070670.

With convention and other news having taken up much of the past few issues, we have fallen behind on book reviews, so a couple of significant books by notable monastic authors have not gotten attention. One is this book by Father Michael Casey. He explains his premise for this book in the introduction, where he says, “after more than 60 years in a monastic community, I decided it may be useful to set down some of my thoughts on how the ideals of communal monastic living are expressed in practice.” He goes on to acknowledge that these are his own observations of one particular community, but it may have broader application. Indeed it does, as he reflects on prayer, lectio, work and chapters with such titles as “Neither Slaves nor Children” and “Self-Truth.”

While many of Father Michael’s books look at the theology of the Benedictine rule and its characteristics in a broader perspective for a lay audience, this book is much more about the realities of lived experience. This is not to say that it might not have much to say to a lay audience, especially oblates who have a relationship to a monastic community and know its members and its personality. It should evoke much thought for anyone who lives in a monastery and might be particularly useful for discussion with newer members trying to explore the balance between ideals and real life.

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*The Monastic Heart: 50 Simple Practices for a Contemplative and Fulfilling Life* by Joan Chittister, OSB (Convergent Books, 2021) 264 pp., \$26, ISBN 9780593239407.

Another prominent writer has a book that has become quite popular with oblates and seekers. Sister Joan Chittister, OSB, has gathered a list of favorite monastic terms in her book. Many of these terms are less than household words outside the monastery, terms such as “horarium,” “fuga mundi” or “memento mori.” Others are familiar words but

their monastic meanings may be quite different from the ordinary, as with words like “bells,” “humility” or “cell.”

For each of the 50 words, Sister Joan provides a thoughtful reflection of less than three pages, followed by another page or two with the heading “Integrating the Practice.” Here, she invites the readers to think about some way in which this image or concept can be meaningful in their own lives. The book uses concrete examples from the life of the author and her community to give flesh to the concepts. Because each chapter is so short, this book is probably best suited for one’s individual lectio, not only oblates who are already grounded in the theology of the Rule, but also those unfamiliar but looking for a simple introduction to monastic practices.

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*Stability: how an ancient monastic practice can restore our relationships, churches and communities* by Nathan Oates (Paraclete Press, 2021) 158 pp., \$16.99, ISBN 9781640606466.

Nathan Oates is lead pastor of Emmaus Church Community, which he started in 2004. Once again, we see a book by someone not only outside the monastic tradition but from outside the main Protestant denominations finding wisdom in the monastic way of life.

The author, like many theologians and social scientists, has recognized the critical role of stability, and the lack of it, in contemporary society. He says he has come to some realizations about “staying put as a strategy for the restoration of all things.” By his own unique path, he has come to the *Rule of St. Benedict* and now opens this book with a good introduction to its theory of stability.

The bulk of the book relates to his own journey in Italy and an extended retreat at the Benedictine monastery in Norcia. He not only describes some of the highlights of it but shares from his personal journal. The wisdom he receives from the monks, and finds in himself, make for a very readable book that offers inspiration about how, and why, to practice stability in any relationship.

*Praying With Saint Benedict: Reflections on the Rule*  
by Stephen Isaacson (Morehouse Publishing, 2021)  
200 pp., ISBN 9781640654464.

Here is yet another book on Benedictine spirituality coming from outside the circle of traditional Benedictine writers. Isaacson is described on the book cover as “Prior of the Cornerstone Community, a lay group within Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon.” The gift of books from an “outer circle” is that they interpret the tradition for a new generation of lay followers, and this is proving to be a very good thing for spreading the good word.

This book is less a book of reflections that are one man’s interpretation and much more a workbook for personal prayer. It consists of more than one hundred segments of less than two pages each. Each has an excerpt from the *Rule of St. Benedict* followed by a psalm. Next comes “Contemplation” which consists of three questions: what word or image resonates; what connection to one’s own life; and what God is calling the reader to do. The author then has a paragraph of his own reflection and a brief closing prayer.

While it may be a bit too structured for some to consider it true lectio, for others it may be perfect for bringing them into that practice while still giving them some points of focus that are more helpful than just reading the passage by itself. Because each section is so short, it can be a good way to insert both prayer and study of the rule into one’s daily routine.

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Cistercian Publications continues to produce excellent English translations of medieval texts for the scholars and librarians among us. Some recent titles include: *Aelred of Rievaulx: The Liturgical Sermons* (trans. Daniel Griggs), *Bernard of Clairvaux: Various Sermons* (trans. Grace Remington OCSO), *The Works of Richard Methley* (trans. Barbara Newman), *William of Saint-Thierry: The Meditations* (trans. and commentary Thomas X. Davis), *Thoughts and Reflections of Armand-Jean de Rancé, Abbot of La Trappe* (trans. David Bell) and more. While they cannot all be reviewed here, see the full catalogue at <<https://litpress.org/cistercian-publications/Products>>.

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#### Send applications to:

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Sacred Heart Monastery

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edithosb@gmail.com

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