



# 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.*

## *2022 Convention Preparations Underway*

*- Rev. Greg Peters, ABA President*

With their theme of “Give me a word...” the American Benedictine Academy invites all members and other interested persons to come to Schuyler, Nebraska, July 7-9, 2022, to learn how the words of the monastic desert can breathe new life into contemporary monasticism. Three speakers will present plenary sessions over the course of the convention: Sister Laura Swan, OSB, Sister Mary Forman, OSB and Father Tim Vivian will speak on topics related to the convention theme.

The early monastic desert was full of monastic men and women, so much so that Athanasius of Alexandria writes in the *Life of Anthony* that “the desert was made a city” (§14). These men and women moved to the desert in order to pursue union with God. Oftentimes they went about it alone, though there were cenobitic communities too, housing thousands of monastics. A common feature among those living solitary lives was the impulse, the need, to learn the monastic life from others. That is, even the solitaries needed to be monastically formed and they sought out this formation from other monastics. This formation was primarily achieved by way of *apophthegmata* – sayings. The expression “Give me a word” became *the* monastic catch phrase of the early monastic tradition.

The need for a “word” is not just for the sake of knowledge or curiosity; rather, it is for the purpose of salvation. These words matter because they deal with life and salvation. These words are born from wisdom and instill wisdom in the next generation of monastics. These words give life and give it abundantly (cf. John 10:10). These words also lead to action. In the words of our holy father St. Benedict: “Listen, O my son to the precepts of the master, and incline the ear of your heart: willingly receive and faithfully fulfill the admonition of your loving father; (cf. Prov. 1:8, 4:20, 6:20) that you may return by the labor of obedience to him from whom you had departed through the laziness of disobedience. To you therefore, my words are now addressed, whoever you are, that through renouncing your own will you may fight for the Lord Christ, the true king, by taking up the strong and bright weapons of obedience” (RB Prol 1-3). Thus, we must listen to these monastic words!

*(continued on page 3)*

## President's Message

Having recently celebrated the septcentennial anniversary of Dante Alighieri's death (September 14), it is notable that his popularity has not waned in the past seven centuries. A bestseller, his *Divine Comedy* has all the markings of a classic: life, death, intrigue, shady characters, suspense and a perfect ending. The persevering reader is greatly rewarded and rarely shakes off the impression made by the *Comedy*.

Dante is not only an excellent poet, but also a very competent theologian, especially when one considers his knowledge and facility with the ideas of monks and mendicants, especially Gregory the Great, Peter Damian, Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas. Thus, the *Divine Comedy* is simultaneously one of the greatest poems ever written as well as one of the most profound presentations of Christian theology in church history, including reflections on the monastic life.

As we know, monks were a ubiquitous and important presence in medieval life and, rightly or wrongly, they were thought of as particularly holy and held in high esteem. As we also know, not all monks are holy and even the institution of monasticism needs to be reformed from time to time. And this is why Dante meets the great eleventh-century monastic reformer Peter Damian in Paradiso 21.

There are two interesting things to note from this canto. First, the way that Dante looks at

Beatrice, his guide; and second, the contemplatives that he sees climbing a ladder. Contemplative monastics, of course, are called "contemplatives" because their main occupation in life is to think upon and consider God. They do this not only with their eyes but also using their minds, letting their thoughts move beyond the things of this world to reflect on, to contemplate, the one who made this world. Contemplative monastics look at earthly things and through them see God, just as Dante looked at Beatrice in order to see God in her. Yet, when Dante averts his eyes he sees "a joy that tipped the other in the scales!"

I saw a ladder heavenward-tall extend its rungs so high, my own light could not bring that summit to me: on those rungs descend so many splendors that I thought the sky had spilled its wealth of stars upon this sign.

The genesis of the ladder image for the contemplative life goes back to the book of Genesis where Jacob "dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!" (Gen. 28:12). Throughout monastic history, this image of a ladder with angels ascending and descending on it becomes an image of contemplative monastics because they spend their days contemplating God, metaphorically ascending a ladder from the earth to heaven contemplating God's glory.

Then Dante speaks to Peter Damian. Damian has come down to tell Dante about the corruption found in monasteries. In fact, even Peter Damian's former monastery Fonte Avellana has grown cold: "That cloister used to render a rich yield/to Heaven; now a barren, dry terrain,/as shall before much longer be revealed." There would be little point to this conversation if it were not for the fact that monasteries were so important in medieval life. But every reader of Dante should care about the corruption of the monastic life because it is a warning even to us today that things that start out well, things that appear to be greatly blessed by God, can, in time, lose their original fervency and become pale images of what they used to be.

As the American Benedictine Academy helps to keep the monastic flame alight in North America (and beyond, I hope) we need to remind ourselves



### **The AMERICAN MONASTIC NEWSLETTER**

Submit any announcements or articles to:

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

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

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**[www.americanbenedictine.org](http://www.americanbenedictine.org)**

that monasticism is an institution that is always reforming and, for various reasons, in need of reform. Dante helped me to see this and a lot more! Turns out, he is quite a good theologian of monasticism. I would encourage you to read the *Divine Comedy*, especially *Paradiso*, if you have never done it or it has been a while. Your monastic theology will be strengthened as a result.

Greg Peters  
ABA president  
greg.peters@biola.edu



(Convention, continued from page 1)

Yet the goal of our 2022 convention is *not* just to look back at the monastic tradition of the early Egyptian desert in an abstract historical manner but to appropriate that tradition anew for the purpose of moving forward as monastics, oblates and friends of monastic communities. We need to hear a fresh word from the wise monastics of the past but also we need to hear a word from our current ammas and abbas of the monastic desert, literal or otherwise. Thus, our plenary speakers will provide a broad overview of the sayings tradition, paying attention to contextual matters. Further, talks will be dedicated to the use of the *apophthegmata* in *lectio divina* and to the “quotidian soteriology” of the sayings, which are meant for immediate “consumption” and practice, for the “now.”

And our plenary speakers are more than qualified to give us these words!

Sister Laura Swan, OSB is a member of St. Placid Priory in Lacey, Wash. She serves her community as formation director, archivist, and spiritual director, and is book review editor for *Magistra: a Journal of Women’s Spirituality in History*. She is the author of several books, including *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* and *The Wisdom*



*of the Beguines: The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women’s Movement*. She has earned a master’s degree in Christian Ministry and Renewal, a master’s in Theological Studies, and a Post Master Certificate in Spiritual Direction.

Sister Mary Forman, OSB is a graduate of St. John’s University School of Theology and earned her Ph.D. from the University of Toronto’s Centre for Medieval Studies. She taught monastic studies at St. John’s for fifteen years before retiring as professor emerita to serve as prioress of her monastery of St. Gertrude’s in Cottonwood, Id. Sister Mary is the author of *Praying with the Desert Mothers* and editor of *One Heart, One Soul: Many Communities*.



Father Tim Vivian is professor emeritus of Religious Studies at California State University, Bakersfield, and a retired priest in the Episcopal Church. He has written extensively on early Christian monasticism, especially in Egypt, and is the author or co-author of *The Life of Antony* and *Words to Live By* and, most recently, *The Sayings and Stories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (vol. 1 of 2) and *The Life of Bishoi*. Father Tim earned his M.A. in American Literature from California Polytechnic State University (San Luis Obispo), M.A. in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and a Ph.D. of Classics, History, and Religious Studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara. He completed his priestly training at Church Divinity School of the Pacific.



In addition to the addresses, there will be special interest section meetings, the biennial meeting of the membership at which new board members will be elected, and a special Eucharist for the blessing of board members and the commemoration of recently deceased members of the Academy. We hope to see you there!

**Schedule details and registration form will be in the February issue of this newsletter.**

## CANON LAW COLUMN

### Monastic Congregations and Federations

The Federation of St. Scholastica will be celebrating its centennial in 2022 at the regularly scheduled quadrennial general chapter to be held in June 2022 at Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison. This seems an opportune time to write about what is a federation and what is a monastic congregation.

In 1922, the Congregation of St. Scholastica was established through a decree of the Sacred Congregation of Affairs of Religious at the Vatican. This dicastery is currently known as the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, which is usually abbreviated as CICLSAL among English speakers. In 1922, the Congregation of St. Scholastica consisted of ten founding monasteries in: Atchison, Kan.; St. Marys, Penn., Erie, Penn.; Chicago, Ill.; Lisle, Ill.; Elizabeth, N. J.; Pittsburgh, Penn.; Guthrie, Okla. (now in Tulsa); Ridgely, Md. (now in Newark, Del.); and Cullman, Ala. Currently known as the Federation of St. Scholastica, there are seventeen member monasteries in fourteen states of the U.S.A. and one in Mexico.

Immediately, you notice that the name began as the Congregation of St Scholastica in 1922, and then, approximately fifty years later, the name changed to the Federation of St. Scholastica. Still, even though we are named the Federation of St. Scholastica, our constitution refers to us as a monastic congregation of pontifical right (see *Call to Life*, Specific Norm 1: “The Federation of St. Scholastica, a monastic congregation of pontifical right . . .”).

What is the difference between a monastic congregation and a federation? Does the difference only matter to canonists like me? In short, a monastic congregation of autonomous houses (like the men’s monastic congregations and the women’s federations in the U.S.) has some canonical authority, though limited, over its autonomous member houses. A federation, strictly understood in canon law, is a loose association of autonomous houses with no canonical authority over its member houses.

I will make reference to *Cor orans* below. This document from CICLSAL, which applies only to nuns and which requires all nuns’ monasteries to be part

of a federation or congregation, seems to give the president of a federation of nuns more vigilance and jurisdiction over the autonomous houses that come together in a federation. (See *The American Monastic Newsletter* 46:2, June 2015, canon law column for the distinction between nuns and sisters and *AMN* 50:2, June 2019, for an introduction to the *Cor orans* document.)

So, why are the women’s federations in the U.S., which are canonically monastic congregations, denominated as federations rather than as monastic congregations? The change of name from congregation to federation was made in the 1970s by the general chapters of each of the American women’s federations. This name change had first occurred in the two men’s monastic congregations based in the U.S.: the American Cassinese Congregation and the Swiss-American Congregation. They had renamed themselves as federations in the early 1970s. There were discussions about the meaning of the reality of being many monastic houses gathered in one association, first called congregations, and then changed to federations. It seemed at the time that the word federation more clearly expressed the reality of autonomous houses joined in one organization, each house with its own traditions and unique way of expressing the monastic way of life. Nevertheless, after the new Code of Canon law was promulgated in 1983, the men’s federations changed their name back to congregation.

It seems that the motivation for the name change in part, at least in the women’s federations, was to show that the women’s federations were not centralized hierarchical congregations like most of the apostolic religious congregations which have a superior general and a general council that are over all the houses of the apostolic institute. A superior general has authority over all members of all houses. That is not true for a federation president. In fact, in the federations, it is the monastic houses themselves which are the members of the federation, not the individual sisters in each monastic house. And the authority of the federation president, even regarding the member houses, is very limited – such as conducting canonical visitations and approval

of large transfers of property and extraordinary expenditures. Outside of those very limited matters, the federation is at the service of the member monasteries but cannot mandate anything. While the president of a monastic congregation is “comparable to a major superior,” canon 620 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law makes it clear that such a president “does not have all the power that universal law grants major superiors.”

The women’s Benedictine groups retained the name as federations, but the men’s groups changed back to congregations in the 1980s, which coincided with their study of the new Code of Canon Law. What difference does it make whether the federations are denominated as federations or monastic congregations? In recent years, Pope Francis and then CICLSAL issued legislative documents for nuns (though not applicable to sisters or monks). An important part of that legislation requires that monasteries of nuns now be members of a federation or a monastic congregation. While the legislation seems to use these words interchangeably in most parts of its provisions, a federation of nuns is treated differently from a monastic congregation of nuns.

One of the differences that I find troubling is that federations of nuns must have a “federal assistant” appointed by CICLSAL, and this federal assistant must be ordained. It is the federal assistant who is the primary communicator to the Vatican regarding the federation, not the nuns themselves (see *Cor orans*, ##149-155). A monastic congregation, however, is not required to have a “federal assistant.” Instead, the president is the communicator with the Vatican regarding the monastic congregation.

Because CICLSAL doesn’t always seem to keep clear categories of different types of institutes, it seems important that our U.S. women’s federations have an accurate denomination which matches their canonical reality. This is a matter currently being discussed among the U.S. women’s federation presidents and councils, and might be addressed at future general chapters.

If you have in your monastery library *A Handbook on Canons 573-746* (the canons in the Code of Canon Law regarding religious institutes), I commend to you the last chapter of that book, entitled “Monastic Life

Under the Rule of St. Benedict and the New Code,” by our friend and brother, Father Dan Ward (St. John’s Abbey, Collegeville, Minn.). There he discusses all the canons that have special meaning in our monastic life. At pages 308-310, Dan discusses the terminology of federation and monastic congregation. Even though this book was published over 35 years ago, I find it is still one of the best canon law commentaries for religious. While it is certainly helpful for canonists, it is written primarily for religious themselves – it is, after all, a “handbook” on the canons concerning religious.

*If you have a question or idea for a future column, feel free to contact Sister Lynn.*

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lynnmckenzieosb@gmail.com

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*Learn more about some American congregations:*

Oetgen, Jerome, “The American-Cassinense Congregation: Origins and Early Development (1855-1905) *American Benedictine Review* 56:3,4, 2005.

Sutera, Judith, *True Daughters: Monastic Identity and American Benedictine Women’s History*, Benedictine College Press, 1987.

Klimisch, Jane, *Women Gathering: The Story of the Benedictine Federation of St. Gertrude*, Peregrina Press, 1993.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

2022 ABA Convention

*Give Me a Word*

July 7 - 9, 2022

St. Benedict Center

Schuyler, Neb.

## Anglican Benedictines - Another Fruitful Branch

### *The Anglican Benedictine Confederation (ABC) “Building a Community of Communities”*

#### *Vision*

The Anglican Benedictine Confederation is envisioned as a body into which the Benedictine communities and monasteries of the Anglican Communion are gathered as a living network of mutual sharing and common interest throughout the world. It is anticipated that membership will consist of voluntary participation by both recognized Anglican communities, both traditional and contemporary, cloistered and dispersed, and their companion groups of (non-Anglican affiliates).

#### *Mission*

The goals or mission of the Anglican Benedictine Confederation are:

- 1) International networking and sharing of information.
- 2) The ongoing establishment of a Cycle of Prayer for all the Anglican Benedictine communities and groups around the world.
- 3) The development of common goals around rule of life, religious formation, liturgical practices, promotion of social justice and proper use of creation, and mutual support.
- 4) An international gathering every three years of all of the communities represented in the Confederation for three days of prayer, exposition of ideas, and collaboration.

#### *Structure*

Currently our structure is made up of regular (every six to eight weeks) Confederation meetings to get to know each other, our communities, and share common interest and concerns to us all as Anglican monastic Benedictine communities from around the world. Once we have worked together for some time we may seek more wisdom and discernment around a common structure or perhaps a Constitution or Common Agreement among participants. Right now we are following the precepts of the Rule of Benedict to LISTEN attentively to each other.

#### *Communication*

Following our regular meetings we hope to share our common experiences with the communities

we represent. Communication with members of the Confederation is expected to consist of a twice-a-year written publication published publicly to inform all of its members on its ongoing life. The Confederation will use social media, email, online networks to share this information to its members and affiliates.

#### *Confederation Prayer*

Heavenly Father, our guide to holy living in community, Saint Benedict, taught us that Christ is in us and present in other people we meet, so that there are no moments when he is not alongside us, or welcome and hospitality should be absent from our minds. Help us in the Anglican Benedictine Confederation to encourage and support each other and be aware of God speaking to us every day and moving us forward together to establish communities bringing a taste of heaven to earth. This we ask through your Son Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen

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### Dispersed Anglican Benedictines A New Way of Benedictine Life

At present there are three expressions of Benedictine monastic life in the Anglican/Episcopalian tradition, each one with its charisms and its challenges. There are cloistered Benedictine communities, dispersed oblate communities bonded and in covenant to a traditional cloistered community, and dispersed independent Benedictine communities of professed members.

In the Anglican Communion there are currently around 15 dispersed Benedictine communities and 20 cloistered Benedictine communities and 10 Benedictine foundations or loose associations within the entire Anglican Communion.

As a member of an Independent Dispersed Benedictine Community (The New Benedictine Community of the Holy Trinity), I am keenly aware of a new role that we are playing as a bridge between oblate Communities and traditional cloistered Communities. Since we all live under the same Rule of Benedict, we are all subject to the same principles and ideals even though on a day to day basis this may look very different from one group to the other.

As Dispersed Benedictines, or what some like to call Secular Benedictines or Secular Religious as opposed to traditional Religious or Cloistered

Benedictines, we aim to model what it means to be mature, non-hierarchical, inclusive, and welcoming communities (and in many cases ecumenical). We are keenly aware that there is no need for distinction of clerical status, ordained and non-ordained) since the Rule governs equality in that way. It is probably one of the great gifts of Benedictine monasticism that in its origin it is non-clerical and mostly lay-led. Also, our relationship with the hierarchical element of the church is balanced between having an Episcopal Visitor,(a bishop), our written constitutions, and our written customaries, which govern our life together. This, believe it or not, gives us a certain freedom to reach out to many marginalized people who are on the periphery of institutional religious structures.

We are what some call part of the New Monasticism movement, which also has many dimensions and expressions. Not all “new monastics” are strictly monastic. Many are a combination of mendicant orders with monastic touches. But Benedictine New Monastics are both monastic and Benedictine as professed members of a Benedictine community.

In discussion with many Benedictine oblates, there is a new initiate for oblates to “grow up” and take on more responsibility for their activity, formation, and participation with their covenant communities. I believe we as Dispersed Communities can help model how this movement is certainly a possibility and continue to empower current oblate communities to stand on their own two feet, take charge of their future, and share a mutual commonality and partnership with their covenant communities (the cloistered communities to which they belong).

We are in a new era, an era where all are given gifts to share and all are meant to learn from the wisdom within our specific traditions and life experiences. As dispersed Benedictines we are the new kids on the block. We depend heavily from the collective wisdom gained and lived by both cloistered and oblate Benedictines. At the same time we are a new expression of the ancient call to live fully into a monastic existence in the world.

Vincent C Schwahn osb  
Comunidad de San Bonifacio CDMX Mexico  
New Benedictine Community USA  
Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles

Founded in 2012, the New Benedictine Community (of the Holy Trinity) is a dispersed Benedictine community (Anglican) for both men and women. Because of our conviction that St. Benedict speaks wisdom to us today, we choose to be a community that lives out his values of prayer, service, hospitality, community, study and humility. We strive to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, walking in the footsteps of generations who have gone before us and gathering in His name. We seek to be inspired by our holy father St. Benedict whose Rule we embrace as our guide for the journey. We do this together as community, in prayerful reverence, and with the hope that God will direct our lives according to His purpose. We gather online at various times each week to do the Opus Dei following Benedictine daily prayer practices. We schedule our common prayer at varying hours during the day and evening in order to include members in different time zones.

As a dispersed community and as Benedictines, we seek to find the sacred within the ordinary. As such, our members, both clergy and lay, find any number of ways to be involved in their local communities, whether in the United States, Mexico, England, or Spain. More generally, our community seeks to maintain a balance of prayer, service, and community. We seek to live in the presence of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the One who creates, redeems, and brings to fulfillment.

There are various levels of involvement with our community. We refer to these levels as Inquirer, Companion, Novice, those in Simple Vows, and those in Solemn Vows. There is no necessity to move from one level of involvement to another. Our community currently consists of seven professed members and two companions. There are additionally four or five inquirers who regularly pray with us. We welcome any who may wish to journey with us in lives of prayer and service.

We will have our General Chapter this year at the Episcopal House of Prayer on the grounds of Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota.

The New Benedictine Community (of the Holy Trinity) is an associate member of the National Association of Episcopal Christian Communities (NAECC).

Robert Thompson osb, co-prior  
The New Benedictine Community  
(of the Holy Trinity)



## NEWS

Two elections of leadership were overlooked during recent months. Sister Kimberly Prohaska, OSB, who had been acting interim administrator at St. Scholastica Monastery (Fort Smith, Ark.) was elected as prioress and Mother Laura Cathcart, OSB, was chosen prioress by the sisters of Holy Angels Convent (Jonesboro, Ark.).

\* \* \* \* \*

Benedictine claustral priors from various monasteries in the United States gathered at St. Benedict's Abbey Retreat Center in Benet Lake, Wisc., from July 15-18, 2021. Father Joel Rippinger, OSB, a noted author and monastic scholar from Marmion Abbey, gave the conferences. Brother Anselm Broom, O.S.B. from Conception Abbey in Missouri coordinated the meeting.

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Abbot Primate Gregory Polan, O.S.B. convoked the annual Synod of Presidents at Sant'Anselmo from September 6-11, 2021, which involved the abbot presidents of all the congregations of monks from around the world. The Abbot Primate gave a report of the State of the International Benedictine Confederation. Rector Bernhard A. Eckerstorfer O.S.B. gave a report on the enrollment and programs of the three faculties of the Pontifical Athenaeum S. Anselm and other reports were given on collegiate life, the annual financial report and recent renovations. Status reports of the various congregations were delivered by the respective abbots president. A statistical report on the confederation extracted from the newly-digitized *Catalogus Monachorum* prepared by Fr. Patrick Carter, O.S.B., of Clear Creek Abbey was discussed. There were other presentations and discussion on the *Traditionis Custodes* apostolic letter issued by Pope Francis in July, matters in the Code of Canon Law, attempt to renew the Benedictine Proper Calendar of Saints and an initiative to request from Pope Francis the possibility of having brothers as abbots and conventual priors. The synod also decided to postpone the next

Congress of Abbots until September 2024. Finally, the Abbots President elected a new council for the Abbot Primate. The new council includes Abbot President Maksymilian Nawara, O.S.B., Abbot General Antony Puthenpurackal, O.S.B. and Abbot President Jeremias Schroeder, O.S.B. of the St. Ottilien Congregation, who was also re-elected a vicar to the Abbot Primate.

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After 33 years of outstanding leadership and service, Peter Dwyer has announced his plan to retire in June 2022 as director of the Liturgical Press. As we look to the future of the Press, the monks of Saint John's Abbey and the staff of Liturgical Press have enlisted the help of AGB Search to launch the search for our next director. We ask for your assistance in either nominating outstanding individuals or in learning of your personal interest in being considered a candidate for this position. To learn more about the opportunities for the next director, please visit the AGB Search page for more information: <https://www.agbsearch.com/searches/directorceo-liturgical-press>.

The search committee will accept nominations and applications on a rolling basis, although candidates should submit materials on or before December 1, 2021 for the most favorable consideration.

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The Association of Benedictine Retreat Centers held their meeting virtually August 23-24, hosted from the Benet House Retreat Center in at St. Mary's Monastery in rock Island, Ill. The speaker for the conference, entitled "Hospitality and Conversatio: Welcoming Diversity in Retreat Ministry, was Sister Linda Romey of Mount St. Benedict in Erie, Penn. She is coordinator of communications and development there and former director of marketing and advertising for the National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company in Kansas City, Mo.. Linda's writing on the future of religious life appears on NCR's *Global Sisters Report*. In addition to her keynote address, there were discussions on the various aspects of retreat center management best practices such as marketing, hospitality and program staff. The group's website <[theabrc.org](http://theabrc.org)> has information about the organization and about making a retreat, including a list and links for all the member retreat centers.

## DON'T FORGET

All ABA memberships run concurrent to the calendar year, regardless of when the membership began. If your membership is not a 2-year membership that extends to 2022, it's time to renew for the coming year. The membership form is on the last page of this newsletter and at the ABA website. Please 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.

## 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.

The word “essay” derives from the French verb *essayer* – to try, probe, or test. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that essays offer a sense of inquiry and discovery. They provide concrete evidence of the thinking that has gone into a piece of writing. The best essays spark thinking. They maintain a balance between the objective and the subjective. They inspire and delight the reader as well as inform.

In keeping with the upcoming ABA conference theme of “Give Me a Word...” we are seeking essays that explore how God speaks in monastic tradition, the Rule of Benedict, and everyday monastic life, and what word (wisdom) Benedictine life has to share with the world today. Your essay should be 3000–3200 words in length and incorporate a variety of published or archival sources and personal experience.

### *Requirements for Participation:*

The contest is open to professed members and oblates up to 10 years after first profession or oblation

Submit a double-spaced essay of 3,000-3,200 words in a Word document.

Your essay should contain no identifying information.

In your accompanying email please include your name, community, date of first profession or oblation, and mailing address.

### *Send to:*

Sister Colleen Maura McGrane, O.S.B., Contest Committee Chair at:  
colleenmaura@gmail.com

*Deadline:* March 31, 2022

Winners will be notified by May 15, 2022.

### *Prize:*

A two-year membership in the American Benedictine Academy  
Waiver of registration and hospitality fees for the 2022 ABA convention

A book of interest for monastics/oblates

The possibility of having one's essay published in a relevant publication

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Balaam's Donkey: Random Ruminations for Every Day of the Year* by Michael Casey OCSO (Liturgical Press, 2019, ISBN 978-0-8146-8463-4) \$29.95.

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Some new books got overlooked in recent issues of this newsletter as we tried to keep up with the pandemic and other news stories. One that came out in 2019 is this one by the popular Cistercian writer Michael Casey OCSO. It is exactly what the title announces it to be. Each reflection is a page or two long, which means that the book is a hefty 450 pages. They are indeed random, generally having nothing to do with the liturgical season or feast of the day (such as musing on wrinkles on Christmas Eve).

Though some might have liked a more targeted sorting, there is always something to think about as Fr. Michael gives us the fruits of his reflections in his personable, conversational manner. With a new year beginning soon, it would be a lectio-time bonus to pick up this book and cherish its thoughts each day.

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*The God Who Gave You Birth: A Spirituality of Kenosis* by Cyprian Consiglio OSBCam (Liturgical Press, 2021, ISBN 978-0-8146-6657-9) \$17.95.

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Another author skilled at deep thoughts wrapped in a conversational tone is Camaldolese Benedictine Fr. Cyprian Consiglio. His book is in appearance the opposite of Casey's, being a small hand-sized book of just over 100 pages.

Even if you don't know theological terms like "kenosis," it won't affect your enjoyment of the book. The theology of God, as presented to us in Jesus, is brought to the reader in the most comprehensible of reflections. The author uses images drawn from such sources as Greek mythology, Islam or contemporary hymn lyrics to illustrate the different ways in which we might image God and the acts of God's and Jesus' self-emptying. This book could even be a good way to help someone who has a very limited experience of Catholic theology to begin to understand how to see God in a broader perspective than, as Fr. Cyprian's opening pages note, a Zeus-like character throwing thunderbolts from a mountaintop.

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*A Benedictine Reader 530-1530*, edited by Hugh Feiss, OSB, Ronald Pepin and Maureen O'Brien (Cistercian Publications, 2019, ISBN 978-0-87907-275-9) \$49.95.

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Also published in 2019 was this compendium by three highly regarded medievalists. It is a massive 674 page compendium arranged chronologically by centuries with selections from 32 primary sources in the Benedictine tradition.

The cover informs that the collection was more than twenty years in the making, a collaboration of a dozen scholars. What it does not say is that originally there were to be a series of these sourcebooks rather than one giant one so that more attention could be paid to different eras and groups. When the idea was first surfaced, more than thirty years ago, women were being considered a special category, and one volume would have been focused on them. In this final one-volume version, the role of women is almost entirely ignored. Hildegard of Bingen is the only woman whose writings merit a few pages; the only woman's biography is a portion of the *Life of Christina of Markyate*. There is also acknowledgement in the introduction to the *Book of Nunnaminster* that "... in fact the book may have been compiled by a woman." Not even someone as famous as the Helfta nuns are represented, and this by the company that actually publishes the books of St. Gertrude the Great.

This book is not likely to become spiritual reading for the average person (unless a novice in a monastery) but it is a useful reference book for monastic libraries as it contains good modern translations of some classic works and has substantial bibliographies of primary and secondary sources, as well as cross-reference indexes to scripture and classical sources.

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*The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness: Book 5* by Gertrud the Great of Helfta, translated by Alexandra Barratt (Cistercian Publications, 2020, ISBN 978-0-87907-186-8) \$44.95.

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Despite the omission in the above-reviewed book, last year also saw the publication of the last of the five books of St. Gertrud's famous *Herald* translated and introduced by Alexandra Barratt, the capable translator of all the volumes.

Of course, it is well known that the saint did not write all of these books herself but the attribution to her is actually an acknowledgement of the interlaced literary achievements of several sisters of Helfta. With that in mind, there is bonus material in this volume as it includes Parts Six and Seven of Mechtilde of Hackeborn's *Book of Special Grace*. The sections translated here are similar in content to the other book as they contain more visions given to the nuns and a section on the death of Abbess Gertrud, who for so long was confused with the writer Gertrud who was never an abbess. Congratulations and gratitude are to be offered to Dr. Barratt for completing this monumental and important work.

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*The Monastic Heart: 50 Simple Practices for a Contemplative and Fulfilling Life* by Joan Chittister OSB (Convergent Books [Random House], 2021, ISBN 978-0-593-23940-7) \$26.

Sister Joan Chittister continues to succeed at making monastic spirituality accessible to the public through books published by major commercial publishing houses. This one comes from Convergent, which is an imprint of Random House, which is a division of Penguin (which shows how much the publishing world has been gathered into a few mega-publishers).

This book of just over 250 pages consists of 50 segments of about 5 pages each. They offer ordinary readers ways to make their lives more meaningful based on such monastic practices as solitude, listening, morning prayer, stability and even things like "Incense: The Sweet Balm of Life." As always in her writing, Sister Joan packs a punch in a few paragraphs. After a brief explanation of whatever the concept is for that chapter, she has a section called "Integrating the Practice" in which she invites the reader to find the meaning of this concept in their own life situation.

The interest in monastic practices that is still being shown by mainstream publishers is a sign that people are hungry for a spirituality that is relevant to everyday life in a world with so many things that run counter to community, silence, humility and other qualities that can be ably presented by writer/practitioners like Sister Joan. This would be a particularly good book to recommend to inquirers about oblate life or the curious who come to our retreat centers.

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