

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 Forum, and other interested persons.

Recalling the Birth of a Benedictine Internet

It seems like only yesterday that the internet became a part of contemporary life and yet it is so taken for granted that it is hard to remember what life was like without it. The recent death of Brother Richard Oliver, OSB, of Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn., brings to mind his vital role in the beginnings of Benedictine presence in the digital world.

As was true of his generation, he began his monastic life without imagining how the world would change in his lifetime with the birth of this new technology. He made his profession in 1970 and proceeded to serve as an English teacher at Saint John's Preparatory School, a librarian at Saint John's University and European field director for the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library.

In the 1990s, however, he and others in the information technology world, witnessed something transformative. Brother Richard could sense, long before most other monastics, how the internet could bring the Benedictine message to the world. He launched a quite primitive, by today's standards, rudimentary website named "osb.org" which featured the text of the Rule of St. Benedict, links to other associated sites, and news of interest to monastics and others associated with the Benedictine world.

A colleague, Sister Diana Seago, OSB, of Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas, recalls those pioneering days. "I was working in development at Benedictine College, and one of the professors had made a website for the college. I thought that would be good for our community." This was not an easy task in those early days. She and other early adopters had to teach themselves the HTML language and create their websites from scratch. There was little in the way of artistry or creativity, mostly just information about the institution with some links and means to contact, but this was a giant step forward in getting the Benedictine word out to the world.

It was in this time of website infancy that she first encountered Brother Richard. Hers was the first website for a women's monastery that he had found, and he was eager to have a collaborator. She

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President's Message

The American Benediction Forum promotes “love of learning” and “desire for God” through research, writing, and conversation among its members and by fostering ongoing formation to the Benedictine way of life. The Forum is a non-profit association whose purpose is to cultivate, study and support the Benedictine charism within contemporary culture.

What is “formation”? What is “ongoing formation,” and how are these connected with Jean LeClerc’s apt titular phrase, “the love of learning and the desire for God”? As the American Benedictine Academy board met to consider revising our name, mission and purpose, formation emerged as a key area of our concern. We are to be an organization not simply for professional academics, but for all those interested in deepening their formation in monastic life and values. While some communities are well-situated to offer quality ongoing formation for both their vowed members and oblates, others lack the resources to be able to do this well. Thus many interested in being formed by monastic wisdom look to our organization to provide opportunities for learning and growth. Our mission going forward is to support this effort.

At one level, formation is about training. It is about learning facts or skills needed to do something. More than that, though, formation is about fostering growth that affects one’s becoming. In the Roman Catholic seminary world, in which I have worked for twelve years, we speak of four dimensions of formation that need attention: the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. While these concepts may originally have been brought to the Church in relation to preparation of future priests, they also are considered crucial in documents related to formation for deacons and lay ministers; non-Catholic Christian organizations now use them. They are worth considering for those of us in monastic life as well.

Intellectual formation is what most people think about when we speak of formation. It is about providing the knowledge one needs to do a particular function. Within Benedictine life, this would include at minimum some studies of monastic practices, sources, history and tradition, and a fundamental level of theology.

Prior to this, though, anyone who would be a minister of the Church, and anyone who would be a member of a religious community, need to have a healthy foundation of human formation. Human formation includes the things that make one a well-balanced person: attending to physical and mental health, knowing one’s personality, and integrating one’s experiences such that they don’t get in the way of being in relationship with others. Human

formation includes sexuality finding its proper place in life, developing emotional intelligence, and knowing and working with one’s gifts and limitations. While much human formation happens in the family home and the social spaces of life during one’s years of growing up, it continues throughout one’s life.

Spiritual formation attends to the knowledge and practices needed to foster right relationship with God and neighbor. It may include learning methods of prayer and the patterns of particular liturgies, but also is about fostering awareness of God’s presence and action within one’s life, such as might be discerned in the privileged space of spiritual direction. The Christian tradition is rich with wisdom from spiritual masters who have gone before us.

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www.americanbenedictine.org

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Finally, pastoral formation is about gaining the skills needed to be able to serve others well. While some of the other dimensions of formation may be more personal in nature, pastoral formation fundamentally is oriented outward. It can include everything from understanding the dynamics of counseling to learning another language. Pastoral formation includes gaining skills to perform the music needed in a liturgy. It could mean learning to read a budget sheet or gaining skills to form young people in the faith. Within monastic life, we might think of all the jobs that need to be done to keep a community running smoothly, and the ongoing training needed to keep people equipped to serve effectively.

Those of us steeped in the Benedictine way of life experience something of these different dimensions of formation as we come into community, but the nature of continuing conversion latent in our profession of *conversatio morum* means that formation itself needs to be ongoing. We should desire to continue to learn and grow. The American Benedictine Forum will aim to provide opportunities that allow the charism to take deeper root in our hearts.

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immediately recognized a kindred spirit, a man who was passionate about bringing Benedictinism to the world. Brother Richard sent invitations for a workshop where other monastics could begin to explore this rich resource. This was the beginning of a vast network of Benedictine presence in cyberspace.

They and a handful of others were off and running. Sister Sean Douglas of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde, Mo., who attended that first workshop, had begun building computers and taught Sister Diana how to make them in exchange for learning from her about web design. Sister Linda Herndon, who was a professor of computer science at Benedictine College, co-authored an article with Sister Diana on the internet as a vehicle of Benedictine hospitality and the webmaster as a modern porter of the monastery.

Brother Richard remained a central figure in this digital revolution, assisting other communities to see the importance of the technology and how critical it would be for them in the future. These early developers proceeded to design websites for other monasteries and to train other monastics to become web hosts. From his first modest website, Brother Richard expanded his content to the complex and artistic “osb.org” of today, linking the entire Benedictine world. Today, it is hard for a younger generation to imagine how anyone communicated, maintained relationships or did business before the internet. Monastic communities depend on their websites and social media to reach potential vocations, donors, retreatants, friends and strangers.

Once again, as in a history of centuries, Benedictines were groundbreakers in using a new technology to benefit themselves and those whose lives they touch. Although many of today’s monastics may not know his name, they are indebted to Brother Richard Oliver and his collaborators for their vision and imagination.

CANON LAW COLUMN

Civil Law Documents

There are civil law documents that are to be signed at various stages of entrance and membership in a monastery. This column will list the title of the recommended documents and provide a short commentary on each. The documents themselves are not included since some are state specific.

1) Declaration on Remuneration

The Declaration on Remuneration (declaration) is to make sure that the person is not categorized or considered an employee of the monastery and eligible to collect present or back wages. It applies not only during postulancy but continues in effect during the entire time a person is a member.

A person signs the Declaration at the beginning of postulancy but only if the person has legal residence status in the United States (e.g. citizenship, permanent residence, R1 status). If the person does not have legal residence status, the person signs the Declaration after he/she has been granted it. A person visiting a monastery on a visitor visa is not to sign the Declaration since a person on a visitor visa is not permitted to work or receive work-related benefits such as health insurance. Signing the Declaration while on a visitor visa jeopardizes the application for R1 status.

2) Health Care Directive

The Health Care Directive (Directive) names a health care agent who can make medical decisions for a person unable to do so. The signatory is free to name whomever he/she wishes. It is recommended that a monastery not have a policy requiring a member to name a superior since that could be seen by others, especially family members, as coercive. Even though a superior is not the health care agent, the monastery still has a say in a monastic's medical decision-making if the monastery must contribute to the cost of the medical care.

It is recommended that a postulant have a Declaration so that the monastery knows whom to contact in the case of an emergency. A Directive should be updated on a regular basis and if the health care agent has died. A copy of the Directive is kept in the person's file. A copy also should be provided to the person's primary physician and to the nearby hospital.

If the person leaves the monastery, the Directive is to be returned to him/her. It can be destroyed after the death of the person.

3) Medical Release Form

The Medical Release Form (Form) authorizes medical providers to release medical information to a named individual. Some states have a standard form that must be accepted by a medical provider. In other cases, a medical provider may require the use of its own form. If there is a state standard form, it is recommended that it be used.

4) Declaration of Total Renunciation

The Declaration of Total Renunciation (Declaration) makes valid in civil law a monastic's total renunciation of ownership of assets. All assets acquired after profession are the assets of the monastery even if civil law requires that they must be held in the name of the monastic. An example of this is retirement benefits.

The Declaration is signed prior to profession of solemn vows. It is signed at the time of perpetual profession in a monastery that requires total renunciation. It also is signed by a person who has patrimony but sometime after perpetual profession personally decides to make total renunciation. See canon 668.5.

5) Last Will and Testament

A Last Will and Testament (Will) is a legal document that states how the assets of a deceased person are to be distributed. In the case of total renunciation, the monastic states in the Will that his/her assets are distributed to the monastery. If a monastic has patrimony, the Will designates to whom or where the assets are to be distributed. To be in effect, a Will must be probated in a court proceeding within a statutory period established in state law. Except if a monastic has substantial patrimony, a Will is not probated since the monastic does not have personal assets. An exception to this is if a deceased monastic's estate inherits or is gifted with substantial assets within the statutory period, the Will should be probated. See canon 668.1.

6) Power of Attorney

A person executes a Power of Attorney to give another person the authority to manage all or some of his/her assets. The signatory still retains the authority

to manage his/her asset. State statutes often have a short form of the Power of Attorney that is sufficient in most cases for a monastic.

The Power of Attorney is executed at the time of novitiate if the person has substantial assets or at the time a person acquires substantial assets during initiation formation. The Power of Attorney is used in place of a patrimonial document since it is questionable whether a patrimonial document has validity in civil law.

It is true that the monastic retains the authority to manage his/her assets even though the monastic has designated another to do so in a Power of Attorney. Nevertheless, the monastic agrees not to do so. If the monastic is found to be managing and using his/her assets during initial formation, it could be an indication of how the monastic will observe the vow of poverty after solemn or perpetual profession.

It is recommended that a monastery have a policy on personal assets during initial formation. Except in special circumstances, the treasurer or another member

of the community should not act as the Power of Attorney. This avoids any allegation against the monastery of mismanagement of assets if the person leaves. It is also recommended that the policy state that a person cannot renounce or distribute his/her assets while in initial formation. However, such assets as a house or car could be converted to liquid assets. The reason for this policy is that if a person leaves during initial formation, the person has financial assets to support him/herself.

It is a good practice that members of a monastery review documents number 2 through 5 on a regular basis. A member may wish to update or change the document. It also may be that the state has changed the law concerning a document or the state has published a new statutory form.

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NEWS

Sister Lynn McKenzie, OSB, president of the Monastic Congregation of St. Scholastica, has announced the recent appointments of administrators for monasteries of the congregation. Sister Diane Rabe, OSB, will administer her community of Mount St. Benedict (Erie, Penn.); Sister Tonette Sperando, OSB, of Sacred Heart Monastery (Cullman, Ala.) will administer Holy Name Monastery (St. Leo, Fla.) and Sister Andrea Westkamp, OSB, prioress of St. Benedict Monastery (Bristow, Va.), will administer Emmanuel Monastery (Baltimore, Md.). In a recent election, Sister Jeanne Ann Weber was elected prioress of St. Scholastica Monastery (Duluth, Minn.). The Abbot General of the Trappists has appointed Father Jerome Machar, OSCO, a monk of the Abbey of the Genesee (N.Y.) as monastic commissary of New Melleray Abbey (Iowa). Upon the retirement of Sister Kathy de Vico, OCSO, abbess of our Lady of Redwoods (Cal.), Dom Scott Dilworth, abbot of Our Lady of Guadalupe and Father Immediate of Redwoods, appointed Sister Claire Bouttin OCSO as superior *ad nutum* of the community.

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Superiors and delegates gathered at Domus Pacis in Assisi, Italy, for the general chapter of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance from Sept. 3 to Sept. 23, celebrating "Cistercian Charism in Today's World Under the Sign of Hope." There are 13

regional commissions, each giving reports on the status of monasteries in their region. On September 16, the group was joined by the superior generals of "the Cistercian Family": D. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori – Abbot General of the Cistercian Order; M. Elizabeth Mary – Prioress General of the Bernardines of Esquermes; M. Noella – Prioress General of the Bernardines of Oudenaarde; and M. Myriam – Delegate of the Abbess President of the Cistercian Congregation of St. Bernard (CCSB). In his homily on the closing day, Dom Bernardus, Abbot General, described how "this General Chapter has been a journey of searching and listening, but also a holy space full of challenges ... we have shared with one another what touched us, what moved us, what brought us joy or caused us worry ... listening to what God is saying to us personally and collectively. This experience has made us pilgrims of hope."

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The annual Synod of Abbots Presidents convoked by Abbot Primate Jeremias Schröder, OSB, was hosted by the Abbey of Montserrat in Catalonia, Spain from September 15-20, 2025. The synod included reports from the Abbot Primate on the Benedictine Confederation, reports from each of the presidents, reports from Rector Jákó Örs Fehérváry, OSB on the Athenaeum, Dom Geraldo Gonzalez y Lima, OSB on finances, and Prior Brendan Coffey OSB on the college.

The agenda also included the liturgical calendar, new statutes for A.I.M. International and the jubilee for Montecassino in 2029. Sr. Lynn McKenzie, OSB, moderator of the Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum gave a report concerning Benedictine nuns and sisters.

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Saint Meinrad Archabbey will host “The Sacred Music of St. Hildegard of Bingen” Sunday May 17 to Friday May 22, 2026. Participants will spend the week learning the music and monastic theology of St. Hildegard of Bingen, the first named composer in the West, Doctor of the Church, Benedictine abbess, visionary, healer, and preacher. In this workshop, led by expert scholars and performers of Hildegard, Dr. Alison Altstatt, Dr. Rosemary Heredos, and Sr. Jeana Visel OSB, participants will engage her music within the context of her extraordinary and novel musical theology and within the daily rhythm of liturgical prayer with the monks of Saint Meinrad Archabbey. The focus of this immersive week will be on applying Hildegard’s music to contemporary Catholic liturgy. The workshop will culminate in singing a special Mass based on Hildegard’s music at the historic German parish of St. Boniface in Fulda, Indiana, followed by a festive dinner. Information and registration is at:

<www.saintmeinrad.edu/sacred-music/event-calendar/?item=16251>.

There is an opportunity for a limited number of individual in-person voice lessons with Dr. Rosemary Heredos on the Sunday and Friday before and after the workshop begins (available on a first-come, first-serve basis). Email sacredmusic@saintmeinrad.edu to inquire.

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The monastic community at St. Benedict’s Abbey in Benet Lake, Wisc., warmly welcomed claustral priors from various monasteries in the United States and Canada of the American Cassinese Congregation, the English Congregation and the Swiss American Congregation for their annual meeting from November 21-23, 2025. Deacon Steven DeMartino from the Archdiocese of New York was the presenter and facilitator for discussion and dialogue among the priors on “*Wellness of Ourselves and Care of our Brothers.*” These discussions included care for senior monks, formation of junior monks, self-care for leaders, and having difficult conversations. The conventual priors joined the monks at Benet Lake for the Divine Office, Conventual Mass and meals. Father Prior Macario Martinez-Arjona, O.S.B. organized the meeting and all the details of hospitality.

The Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities (ABCU) met at St. Anselm College in Manchester, N.H. from June 23-25, 2025. A panel discussion on “Leading With Our Benedictine Heritage: Charism and Values in Changing Times” included President Joseph Favazza (St. Anselm College), Archabbot Martin Bartel, OSB (St. Vincent College), Prioress Nicole Kunze, OSB (University of Mary), facilitated by President Barbara McDonald (College of Saint Scholastica). Other presentations were: “Divided We Stand: Benedictine Wisdom for Trying Times in Higher Education” by Chris Conway (St. John’s University & College of St. Benedict) and John Delaney (St. Vincent College); “Sacred Spaces: Bridges Benedictine Presence with Institutional and Classroom Practices” by John Bauman and Matt Ridenour (College of St. Scholastica); “Navigating Difficult Conversations across Campus Guided by our Catholic and Benedictine Values” by Gary Bouchard and Bede Bidlack (St. Anselm College); “Listening to the Voice of Tradition: Integrating Catholic Identity and Benedictine Charism in the Formation of Students” by Barb Rezac and John Hopkins (Mount Marty University); “Engaging in Dialogue Across Differences” by Nickie Lora (St. Anselm College); and “Faith, Hope, Love and Leaves: Importance of Community Now” by President Marc Long (Mount Marty University). For some parts of the meeting, the college presidents and monastic superiors had parallel sessions. Throughout the conference, Fr. Francis McCarty, OSB from St. Anselm College led the participants in Lectio Divina.

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The annual summer Junior Professed Formation Program for monks of the American Cassinese Congregation was held at St. Vincent Archabbey (Latrobe Penn.) from June 20-30, 2025.

The formal program included several presentations by Father Paul Taylor, OSB, on “Mission and Vision of Boniface Wimmer”; by Father Edward Mazich, OSB; on “Maintaining Silence in the Modern World” by Dr. Catherine Petranj; on “*Praying the Psalms: What We do Daily, We do Dully Unless We do it Deeply*” by Dr. Lucas Briola; on “*The Eucharist as a Way of Life: The Rule and Holy Witnesses;*” and on “*Benedictine Monasticism and Mission.*” by Dr. Helene Paharik. Included in the schedule were daily prayer and Adoration, time with the monks of the local community, and outings to various sites, including to Pittsburgh for a Pirates baseball game and to visit the nuns at St. Emma’s Monastery in Greensburg.

What's Next for the American Benedictine Forum?

The American Benedictine Forum Board has been working diligently over recent months to implement the revised Mission and Purpose that were approved by the members earlier this year. They were as follows:

Purpose: The American Benedictine Forum is a non-profit association whose purpose is to cultivate, study, and support the Benedictine charism within contemporary culture.

Mission: The Forum promotes love of learning and desire for God through research, writing, and conversation among its members and by fostering ongoing formation to the Benedictine way of life.

With this accomplished, the organization's Constitution and Bylaws had to be revised to align with and implement the new Purpose and Mission. Major changes in the proposed Constitution and Bylaws affect the procedures, governance, and activities of the organization. The Board's recommended changes to these were then submitted to the membership for approval.

Thank you to all who participated in the December 4 Listening Session and the December 8-14 voting to approve the Constitutions and Bylaws for the American Benedictine Forum. At the close of the voting window, a total of 66 votes were cast. Of those, 64 voted yes (97%), so the Constitutions and Bylaws are approved.

The changes include:

- Implementing the name American Benedictine Forum throughout the document
- Placing the revised Purpose and Mission into the document
- Requiring annual rather than biennial Member Meetings
- Expanding the range of programs offered beyond a biennial on-site Convention
- Adding the non-voting role of Immediate Past President to the Board of Directors
- Requiring the Board to meet at least quarterly rather than annually
- Increasing the term of service for elected Board members to 3 years
- Increasing the term of service for the President and Vice-President to 3 years
- Specifying the duties of the Secretary/Treasurer regarding government reports
- Implementing a process for Sections to be formed, continued, and closed
- Clarifying the timing of elections and the beginning of terms of office
- Clarifying the process of member voting
- Replacing the Egregia Award with the Hildegard Award
- Removing the requirement for an on-site Convention every two years

What is next for the American Benedictine Forum?

We look forward to hosting a spring and a fall speaker series, on the overarching theme of "Equipped for Every Good Work." As we no longer have a Convention Committee, we may be looking to establish a Program Committee to help coordinate efforts going forward.

The organization website and social media pages are due to be updated, as well as the logo. The board may look to establish a Communications Committee to help oversee this work, and to assist with producing the newsletter.

Processes for organizing sections will be clarified.

Board member terms will need to be readjusted, so a new election schedule will be established.

Please stay tuned!

ABF MEMBERSHIP

All memberships run concurrent to the calendar year, regardless of when the membership began. Those whose membership expires at the end of 2025 will receive a notice, but you can renew your membership now. The membership form is below and at the website. Please encourage new members to join. Payment may be made by mail or by using the payment link on the membership page of the website.

American Benedictine Forum *Membership Form*

Individual/1 Yr (\$35) _ Individual/2 Yrs (\$50) _____ Student/1 Yr (\$15) _____
New _____ Renewal _____

Payment: Check _____ Swipe _____

Date _____

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/ZIP _____

Country (if not USA) _____

Phone _____ Cell _____ Email _____

Religious Community/Oblate Affiliation/Academic/Other:

Areas of Interest You Wish to Share with the Academy

Please check if you wish to participate in one or more ABA Sections:

Monastic Research _____ Visual Arts _____ Archives _____ Library _____

Send form to:

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