



the Mount

Christmas 2004—O Saving Light



the Mount

Christmas 2004
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On the Cover: Morning light streams through the stained-glass windows in the monastery chapel. The sisters' handbell choir brings a joyful noise to Sunday morning Eucharistic Liturgy at 10 o'clock each week.

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BENEDICTINE CHARISM STATEMENT

The Benedictine way is to seek God in the communal life and to respond in prayer and ministry.

From the *Prioress*

The wait is over, if we find room in our hearts for hope—



Life today often seems like a brief interlude between rushing and waiting. We hurry out the door to appointments only to be told that it will be a “few minutes” before we can see

the person. We rush to airports to catch our flight only to stand in long lines and then face delays in take-off. Waiting is the Advent theme and it involves slowing down to face the present moment and its difficulties. Advent also implies a hope for a future time that is quite different from the life we are living now.

Waiting can change us, if we allow it. In his book, *Images of Hope*, William Lynch, S.J., makes the observation that people in sorrow or depression suffer an impoverishment of imagination. They simply cannot imagine a world different from the one in which they are living. Advent is a time to stir in us new visions, to awaken in us what is possible. It is a time of strengthening our power to imagine what this world could be if we brought about God’s reign of peace and justice.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” (Isaiah 2:4) Advent reminds all of us that we are people who can hope against hope, and need not be submerged by a culture of fear of terrorism that justifies violence in our name. This is an expectation we can hold even though the grim scenes of war are on our television screens each day. War and preparing for war will cease. We cannot live out of a center that is filled with anger and bring about peace. The change

needs to take place first and foremost in our hearts. In this Advent-Christmas season, the message of the prophets, of John the Baptist, and of Jesus, is one of hope and peace.

In Scripture, the imagery is vivid. The lion and the lamb will lie down together. The child, vulnerable and innocent, will not be harmed by the ancient symbol of evil, the snake. These metaphors need to be translated to our time. We must imagine and bring into being another world and time marked by harmony and an ethic of the common good. The prophets tell us during Advent that justice is measured on the scale of concern for the vulnerable in society. It is not organizing life economically, politically and socially with a penchant for the prosperous.

There is much at stake in our global society, perhaps even our own survival, which makes it imperative that we provide new metaphors and images of hope. While we wait, let us stir our imaginations and not give way to sorrow or despair. Advent is a time that reminds us that even with a shaken faith, we can foster great hope and plant those seeds that may blossom into a future we might never see, but our children will.

God is the promise-maker and the promise-keeper. God will meet us this Christmas in our hearts to help us transform our world so we can bring into being “Peace on Earth and good will to all.” Amid your hurrying and waiting, imagine that new world, and join us in bringing it about.

Christine Vladimiroff, OSB

JOINING A MONASTIC FAMILY

The call, the choices, the life

By Tricia Wood DeMarco

What leads a woman to consider monastic life? Frequently, it is a culmination of years of spiritual calling and longing, questioning and searching. Women seeking religious life in contemporary society do so under very different circumstances than in the past. In the 1950s and the 1960s, women most frequently entered a religious community immediately after they graduated from a Catholic high school. Today, entering “monastic formation” as a teenager, or even a twentysomething, is unusual. Women most often decide to explore monastic life in their 30s or 40s, when developing a faith life and looking for a faith community can become both more compelling and more feasible.

Monastic formation is an expansion of our lifelong formation as human beings—spiritually, emotionally, socially, and professionally. We are all “formed” throughout our lives by our experiences and our responses to them. As one begins living in a Benedictine monastery—praying, working, ministering, and sharing life with a family of sisters—it is termed “initial monastic formation.” Such formation does not end with final profession or vows, but continues throughout religious life.

At Mount Saint Benedict monastery, we are fortunate to have a very active initial formation program, with a number of women each month inquiring as to possible entry into the postulancy, the initial formal step to becoming a Benedictine Sister of Erie. Women also inquire about our temporary membership option, the Benedicta Riepp program. Benedicta Riepp members live, work and pray with the sisters for one to three years while participating in the formation program.

Following is a frank discussion with our monastic formation leadership team, Director Sister Dorothy Stoner and Sister Janet Goetz, both of whom entered the Erie Benedictine community in 1966. Sister Dorothy, a religious studies instructor at Mercyhurst College in Erie, holds a master’s degree in theology and a master of divinity degree. Sister Janet manages the monastery’s infirmary and teaches nursing courses at Gannon University in Erie. She is a certified registered nurse practitioner with a master’s degree in nursing.



Sister Janet Goetz, left, and Sister Dorothy Stoner make up the formation leadership team at Mount Saint Benedict. The monastery is fortunate to have close to 100 inquiries each year from women interested in entering into monastic life. Currently, the monastery has four women in initial monastic formation and two women in Benedicta Riepp temporary membership.

Q: Why are so many women looking at the formation program at Mount Saint Benedict today when many communities in the U.S. are seeing no vocation activity?

Sister Janet:

Sister Joan Chittister’s speaking and writing is a strong influence, although she’s not our only sister with national and sometimes international recognition. Our prioress (Sister Christine Vladimiroff) is well known, recognized and respected as a religious leader. And we have other sisters known for their writing or leadership in many areas of monastic life.

I think people are experimenting with their options through their 30s. Many people explore through their 20s, trying to figure out

what they’re going to do. Most women have explored some options before they come here. The other thing that is happening is a real strong spiritual drive and curiosity, a spiritual thinking. That is why people are still attracted to religious life.

Sister Dorothy:

I agree. People are making permanent life commitments—marriage, career, and religious life—later than in the past. I think that is true for all of society.

There’s also a sense of longing, of isolation and loneliness for many people in our society, including young women. I think there’s something about a monastic life. They are attracted to us because they see this as life affirming. But they need to be realistic in their expectations. We are very human. Things aren’t perfect here; we all have daily cares and, although we strive every day to live by the Rule of Benedict, we make mistakes like everyone else.

Q: What is the biggest misconception women have about monastic life here?

Sister Janet:

Sometimes a monastic life can be over-idealized. It means living life with a large group of people day after day. We have a lot to learn here, and hopefully they are open to that. What does following the Rule mean? What does being professed in the Roman Catholic Church mean? What happens when we don’t agree with one another on some aspect of our lives in community?



The initial monastic formation program at the monastery includes a monthly study group with Prioress Sister Christine Vladimiroff. Discussing Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints by Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, are, from left to right, new members at various stages of monastic commitment: scholastic Ellen Porter, postulant Jean Bhatti, scholastic Kathy Horan, Sister Christine, Benedicta Riepp members Claire Creese and Maryann Ingalls, and postulant Colleen Vogt.

Sister Dorothy:

It can look from the outside like we don't live much differently than anybody else. We don't wear a habit, we drive ourselves, we have professional positions outside of the monastery. It's sometimes a shock once you're here to realize how very different the lifestyle really is. It means that I don't make any decision, really, without learning to reflect on how that decision will affect the community. That doesn't mean that what I may want to do isn't something good, but I need to run it through the filter of "how is this going to affect the people I live with?" We share almost everything. We car pool, we share computers, and we live side-by-side with each other.

Q: What is the difference between an apostolic community and a Benedictine monastic community?

Sister Janet:

For a monastic, the concentration really is on community life and the community praying together. The work, the ministry, flow out of these. Apostolic communities were founded with a particular kind of work in mind to meet a need that wasn't being met in society at that point in time. And when religious communities were founded in America, some of those needs were melded together, blurring the distinctions between apostolic and monastic life. But now, we are returning to our founding traditions.

Sister Dorothy:

The Second Vatican Council said we should go back to the spirit of our founders. Now there is more individual choice in terms of what ministries will be, but those choices must evolve, in a Benedictine community, through group prayer and discernment.

Q: What are the initial steps to living a monastic life?

Sister Janet:

Usually a woman contacts us by phone or e-mail, and a dialogue begins with a couple of interviews to try to determine what she is really looking for, and if we are right for her. Then we invite her for one or two visits, followed by a third visit for a week. That process can happen over the period of a couple years, back and forth. We have more inquiries in the spring, when college is out, and during Advent and Lent.

After an initial commitment the postulant is introduced to the Rule of Benedict and how to be at ease with our monastic prayer

life. We also begin to explore the personal gifts a person may be able to bring to liturgy and to ministry and how that can be incorporated into the Benedictine life.

We have many discussions, from how to communicate with people effectively, to sharing the tasks of daily life—washing clothes and dishes, cleaning—to working in a ministry while still having an active prayer life with the community.

Sister Dorothy:

The formation process is also a lifestyle integration of sorts, a new kind of extended family. You learn to integrate working full time while keeping your bearing in community and continuing to learn, basically, how you are going to live the rest of your life if you become a monastic. We have responsibilities in many areas, and we support each other in many ways.

Sister Janet:

Ideally, the second year is the novice year. It includes an intense study of Scripture and the Rule, and of living the life in this monastery. It is a time for deep discernment as to ministry.

In approximately the third year, for the scholastic, we broaden study and discussion to include the historical aspects of monasticism. The focus on theology and social justice issues gets stronger. During all of this formation time there is study, reading, shared lectio (reflective reading of scripture), as well as meeting individually with a mentor chosen upon initial entrance to the community.

Women in formation receive a monthly stipend of \$80. They have given up or suspended everything else they have materially before they come in the door.

Q: What does it really mean to become a Benedictine sister?

Sister Dorothy:

It means that I chose to join a particular group of women who share my desire to live a life shaped by the gospel. It means that I choose to have the rhythm of my life shaped by prayer, and that I don't want to do this alone.

This is a place where you can fully engage your life with others, seeking God together on a daily basis.

For full information on becoming a Benedictine Sister of Erie, or participating in temporary membership through the Benedicta Riepp program, visit our newly revised and detailed membership pages and stories at ErieBenedictines.org.

Thank you for all you did to make our retreat time so special. As always, you are God's welcome incarnated, and that helps to set us free to listen and respond in our own journeys.

—John and Pat Brewster,
Pittsford, N.Y.

Thank you so much for your gracious hospitality. I feel very at home here, and at the same time, inspired.

—Rachel McPherson,
Pasadena, Calif.

Thank you for your loving hospitality and for creating an open, supportive, and inviting space for prayer and renewal.

—Karen Nowlan,
Fairport, N.Y.

Our youngest daughter, Kim, spent a semester at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., and became familiar with the Benedictine ministry of hospitality. When my wife Patti and I were on our way to Erie to be with Patti's sister in her last days, Kim suggested we stay at the monastery.

You welcomed us so warmly, sheltered us, fed us—literally and spiritually—and thereby made this journey a trip of faith with Jesus. Thank you for your reception to us in this time.

—Larry and Patti Schaff,
Nobleboro, Maine

Monastic hospitality— Opening doors, minds and hearts

By Tricia Wood DeMarco

Benedictine monasteries have served as welcome sanctuaries for rest, prayer and renewal to everyone from pilgrims traveling throughout Europe in the sixth century to people of all ages and faiths looking for a peaceful place in today's hectic, high-speed society.

Mount Saint Benedict Monastery—on the shore of Lake Erie with more than 80 rolling acres of woods, meadows, streams and gardens—has become a spiritual rest place, a peace-filled pause, for more than 1,000 guests from all over the world each year.

“People are searching for private time with God,” explains Sister Phyllis Weaver, director of hospitality, while in her office near the front foyer of the monastery. “They are not looking for a convenient place to stay. They sincerely want to be here, praying with the sisters, sharing meals, and participating in both group and private retreats.”



Sister Phyllis Weaver directs the monastery's hospitality guest rooms as well as three hermitages, called "Listening Point," nestled in the monastery woods.



Patty Zaranec, right, a principal at St. Anselm Catholic Grade School in Chesterland, Ohio, makes two or three weekend retreats in a Mount Saint Benedict hermitage a personal and spiritual priority each year. Monastery Hospitality Director Sister Phyllis Weaver makes sure Patty is comfortable in the Scholastica hermitage, a raised cottage in the monastery woods.

The sound of monastery bells calls the sisters to communal prayer three times daily, setting a rhythm and priority that intones the sacred intentions of this place and the people who are here. Guests are welcome to join the sisters for morning, noon and evening prayer in chapel.

The monastery draws many visitors from the Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Cleveland areas. People also fly or drive great distances—it is not unusual to have visitors from California, Florida or just about anywhere in Canada—to attend group retreats at the monastery. Stillpoint retreat is

directed by Christian Zen master Sister Jean Lavin. Spirit of the Seasons is a creation-centered spirituality program guided by Sister Carolyn Gorny-Kopkowski. Guests also may arrange private spiritual direction or participate in the Mid-Life Directions weekends led by Sister Rosanne Loneck. (For a complete listing of spirituality programs at the monastery, go to the Retreats heading at ErieBenedictines.org.)

Sister Phyllis, who “retired” from teaching in 1994 to minister to guests full time, keeps track of 24 monastery guest rooms

and three hermitages in the adjoining woods. “Every visitor and visit is different,” she says. “There are as many spiritual journeys and needs as there are people who pursue them.”

Many guests are themselves spiritual leaders. Clergy, women and men religious, parish ministry directors, people in peace and justice work, all come to Mount Saint Benedict to be spiritually refreshed, to center themselves, and to take the peace of monastery life back to their personal and professional endeavors.

Marge and Neil Himer, right, monastery oblates from Youngsville, Pa., settle in for a weekend retreat in one of the guest rooms at Mount Saint Benedict. The Himers' visits include community prayer with the sisters, as well as gatherings and discussions with other oblates. (See ErieBenedictines.org for information on oblates.)



Monastery guests frequently include nuns and priests from other religious communities across the country and around the world. Mount Saint Benedict Director of Information Technology Sister Mary Therese Egan, left, helps Sister Madeleine Yu, right, a Benedictine from Korea, adjust to life in Erie. One of Sister Madeleine's goals is to improve her English language skills while she is in the U.S. for a yearlong visit. Sister Madeleine writes a short essay every day on her experience in Erie. On the subject of Benedictine hospitality, Sister Madeleine writes: “Many rooms are always prepared for guests. It is very peaceful

and comfortable to offer spirituality and retreats. I meet new guests almost every day. There are more than 1,000 visitors staying on the grounds each year. ... Every Sunday the chapel is filled with guests ... The sisters share a beautiful liturgy by playing piano, organ, guitars, flute and bells.”

This weekend has been a chance for our family to reflect, renew, and appreciate the beauty of God's creation through the woods, the lake, the stormy and calm nights, and the wonderful sisters here at Mount Saint Benedict's. We've found a little piece of heaven in our own backyard.

—Stuart and Cindy Shoskin, Erie Pa.

Thank you for inviting me into your life and teaching me so much, especially love and hospitality. I am still working on both and I have learned much from you all. It is my prayer that God will continue to pour out rich blessings on this community and all its ministries. Thank you for loving me for no good reason.

—Harry Finkbone, North Ridgeville, Ohio

“... Deep within the heart of Benedictine spirituality lies a remedy to hatred, fear, and suspicion: hospitality. At once deeply comforting and sharply challenging, true Benedictine hospitality requires that we welcome the stranger, not only into our homes, but into our hearts.”

—From Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love by Father Daniel Homan, OSB, and Lonni Collins Pratt

alumnae

Sisters celebrate 150 years in Erie Special alumnae concert and homecoming weekend planned



Sister Marilyn Schauble, below, will lead more than 170 alumnae for a concert at downtown Erie's Warner Theatre on Friday, Nov. 25, 2005. A very special Homecoming Weekend 2005—kicking off with the concert—is planned to help celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Benedictine Sisters in Erie.

June 2005 through June 2006 marks a series of special events celebrating 150 years since the Benedictine Sisters were founded in Erie. The sisters hope the thousands of graduates of their former high school, Saint Benedict Academy, will join in the anniversary fetes. In particular, alumnae need to mark calendars now for the year's special SBA homecoming weekend, Friday to Sunday, Nov. 25 to 27, 2005.

Homecoming Weekend 2005 will kick off with an alumnae Christmas concert Friday in the pride of downtown Erie, the opulent Warner Theatre. Saturday night, SBA revelers will relax and reminisce during the annual Christmas party at the Avalon Hotel. Alumnae are invited to join the sisters at Mount Saint Benedict

Monastery Sunday for 10 a.m. Liturgy, followed by a brunch and get-together.

More than 170 women plan to sing in the Christmas concert, to be directed by Sister Marilyn Schauble, an accomplished vocalist, musician and liturgist who



recently completed her master's of arts degree in Theology with a concentration in Monastic Studies at Saint Vincent Seminary in Latrobe, Pa. "Even though I wasn't a student at Saint Benedict Academy, I have enjoyed the 'spirit' that is so much a part of the alumnae support and gatherings," Sister Marilyn says. "It is clear to me that this group of

women shares a special bond that has lived on well past the days when they walked the hallways of the Academy. I have experienced this through the welcome, kindness, inclusion, hospitality and caring among the women today. This choral event is an opportunity to build on this spirit, to share what they are so good at already."

"There is something special about enabling music to rise off the page and into the hearts of all involved," Sister Marilyn says. "This concert will not only mark the 150th anniversary in a very special way, it will also give a message of hope and Christmas Peace to the Erie community. It will be a mutual sharing of gifts and energy, 'spirit' and fun.

"My sincere wish is that the peace which music provides will prepare our hearts for the celebration of Christmas, the Incarnation, given to one and all," Sister Marilyn says.

Call Alumnae Director Ann Comstock, '64, at (814) 899-0614, Ext. 573, to sign up if you want to sing in the alumnae concert.

New alumnae donors respond to annual fund drive, phonathon

More than 1,300 graduates of Saint Benedict Academy responded to calls from 65 alumnae who volunteered weeknights in September to call classmates as part of the annual alumnae fundraiser.

The hard-working callers helped the alumnae association raise \$45,000 during this year's annual campaign. This year, nearly \$1,000 was raised from alumnae donors who had not participated in prior annual campaigns. The money raised will complete the alumnae association's three-year commitment to the Saint Benedict Community Center, the former Saint

Mary's auditorium, which now provides recreational opportunities for adults and children with special needs. Sister Dianne Sabol, '70, is the administrator of the Community Center.

Alumnae who still wish to pledge support may do so by calling Ann Comstock, '64, director of alumnae relations, at (814) 899-0614, Ext. 573 before Dec. 30. For online donations, visit ErieBenedictines.org and click on Saint Benedict Alumnae/Annual Appeal Donations.

Some of the alumnae annual appeal donations help support the Benedictine Sisters to care for their older members.

A small portion also allows the alumnae association to provide scholarships for Catholic education.



Bonnie Zaczyk Prokocki, '67, and Nikki Balczon, '56, give a "thumbs up" to their team's effort during the phonathon.

Reunions continue to be fun and lively—

Check ErieBenedictines.org
SBA Alumnae Reunions for photos.

THE CLASS OF '49 celebrated their 55th class reunion July 31 at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery.

THE CLASS OF '54 gathered the weekend of Sept. 18-19 for their 50th reunion. On Saturday, they began with breakfast at Perkins in Erie, followed by a two-hour trolley ride around the city, stopping off at the old Saint Benedict Academy for pictures, and dinner at the Marketplace Grill. Sunday Liturgy at the monastery was followed by brunch and a tour of the Garden of Memories.

THE CLASS OF '64 celebrated their 40th reunion this summer with a weekend at Peek n' Peak. Saturday afternoon was for golf, gab, games and getting together. Sunday was a wonderful seafood brunch.

CALENDAR of events

Jan. 3, 2005

Homecoming Core Committee meets to plan homecoming Mount Saint Benedict

Jan. 13, 2005

Executive Board Meeting at Mount Saint Benedict

April 2005

Christmas Concert rehearsals begin at Mount Saint Benedict

Thanksgiving Weekend 2005

Nov. 25-27

SBA Homecoming Weekend—Warner Theatre, Avalon Hotel, at Mount Saint Benedict

Visit ErieBenedictines.org for event updates and to download sign-up forms, or send your e-mail address to Alumnae Director Ann Comstock at sbaalum@mtstbenedict.org to receive electronic reminders and sign-ups. If you don't use e-mail, write to Ann at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery, 6101 E. Lake Rd., Erie, Pa., 16511. And whenever you see or hear about SBA alumnae being honored or highlighted for their achievements, let us know. Clip an article, jot it down, or call us, so we can share the news with all our members.

Saint Benedict Academy—roots, happy memories, people who cared

An interview with Pat Straub, '59, member SBA alumnae executive board—



Part of the joy of attending Saint Benedict Academy was that it was like joining a big, happy family. Almost everyone knew everyone else, or their sisters, or their moms, their cousins, aunts or even grandmothers. In many ways, Saint Benedict Academy was an extension of our own families.

Q: What does it mean to you to serve on the Saint Benedict Academy alumnae board?

A: Serving on the board gives me the opportunity to let people in the community know that the graduates of Saint Benedict Academy have a strong allegiance to each other and the Benedictine Sisters who so willingly taught, nurtured and encouraged us, helping us to become the people we are today.

Q: Do you have a fond memory or funny story to share?

A: My sophomore year I didn't sign up early enough to be in the chorus. Nonetheless, I would show up for evening practices and sing along. Sister Mary David Callahan would see me there and didn't say anything—and didn't make me leave. Not actually being in chorus, I wasn't able to go with the group to sing at various places. However, one time, when the announcement was made that all choral members could leave (mid-afternoon) to go to Prep to sing, I stood up and went along. Sister Mary David never did say anything to me about that little stunt. In my junior year, however, I did join and went to all events—legally! Singing in the chorus with Sister Mary David was one of the highlights of my high school years.

Q: What does Saint Benedict Academy mean to you and why do you stay connected?

A: The Class of '59 had a really great group of girls. We all got along and had fun together. The sisters were genuinely interested in us and cared about us, what we became. They were serious and disciplined and gave us many rules to follow. At the same time, they had a great sense of humor and listened to what we had to say. There was a sense of pride in being an SBA student. Why does it mean so much? It's a part of my heritage, part of who I am. What the sisters taught in school was an extension of what my parents taught me at home. Each time I go to the Mount for liturgy or a meeting, that feeling of pride and happy memories is there. It's about having roots and happy times; it's about people caring, it's about recognizing the blessings in your life and thanking God for them. It's knowing that if I ever feel lost, the sisters will be there with open arms. Roots, happy memories, people who care—that about sums it up.

Let Us Pray ... For our recently deceased alumnae—

Margaret Mary Welch Kappelt	'34	Rita J. Czulewicz DeLuca	'48
Frances Mahlbacher Parker Saber	'34	Kathleen A. Braeger Corsi	'51
Frances Seifert Schwartz	'35	Dolores Gackowski Gornic	'56
Josephine Walczak Nash	'35	Barbara A. Oszczepinski Paszko	'60
Virginia R. Hahn Scully	'40	Agnes M. Lenda Toffinski	'65
Sally R zodkiewicz Dubik	'47	Francine Ann Corapi Markiewicz	'74
Catherine A. Sitterle	'48		

To Sing is to Pray twice

—Saint Augustine

By Christine McCammon



For special liturgies and occasions at the monastery, the Schola, directed by Sister Anne Wambach, raises voices in song. First row, left to right, are Sisters Marilyn Schauble, Mary Ellen Plumb, Maryann Ingalls, Claire Creese, Rita Pruchniewski, Colleen Vogt, Mary Daniel Meabl, Bernadette Sullivan, Irene Spacht, Cecilia Sullivan, Jean Wolbert, Susan Freitag, Miriam McMullen-Patrick, Rose Ann Kolbas, Judith Bohn, Margaret Zeller, Lucia Surmik, Ann Bannon, Norma Jean Kingsley, Kathryn Disbrow, Claire Marie Surmik. Second row, Sisters Charlotte Zalot, Susan Doubet, Marcia Sigler, Anne McCarthy, Annette Marshall, Dianne Sabol, Linda Romey, Audrey Berdis, Elizabeth Oettel, and Laura Beichner.

Music raises prayer to another level. It raises prayer whether through singing a cappella, or voices accompanied by organ, piano, handbells, orchestra bells, guitar, clarinet, oboe or flute.

“I almost can’t verbalize how important music is to prayer,” says Sister Jean Wolbert, full-time liturgist at the monastery. “Music lifts whatever happens. The music adds an extra dimension of beauty and solemnity. It helps us enter more fully into worshipping and glorifying God.”

“Music is the gift the sisters give to each other,” Sister Jean adds, “and to the larger world around them.” Visitors are always welcome to pray with the monastic community and often comment on the beauty of music in the community liturgy.

Preparing to give the extensive and significant gift of music is no

“I think prayer does more for us than for God,” Sister Jean Wolbert says, smiling. “God is pleased no matter what we do to worship, but because God is beauty, when we make worship as beautiful as possible, it brings the beauty of God more fully to life in us and in those around us.”

simple task at the monastery. Just one Advent vigil prayer service, for example, requires at least three pages of planning notes.

There are many sisters who assist in planning the community liturgical celebrations, and they, in turn, call on the many gifted

musicians. Sister Jean and other musicians undertake it joyfully. “We have so many talented musicians so willing to share their gifts,” Sister Jean explains. Prayerful liturgical movement is sometimes a part of prayer, and a schola (singing group) of about 30 sisters sings periodically and on special occasions.



“Music is the gift the sisters give to each other,” Sister Jean says, “and to the larger world around them.” Visitors are always welcome to pray with the monastic community and often comment on the beauty of music in the community liturgy.

“Our whole liturgical life has a rhythm that flows with a certain seamlessness,” Sister Charlotte Zalot, one of the musicians, points out. This seamless rhythm is experienced through the daily celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours (Morning Praise, Midday Praise, Evening Praise) and Eucharist.

For the 150 Psalms prayed during the daily office, a number of styles of music are used from ancient chants to modern versions composed by the monastery’s own Sister Mary David Callahan and Benedictine Father Columba Kelly from Saint Meinrad’s Archabbey in Indiana. The sisters are even learning a Psalm version in four-part harmony that was a gift from the Erie Benedictines’ sister community in Pietersburg, South Africa, Sister Jean adds.

But as vital as music is to the prayer life at the Mount, the prayer must also include silence. “It’s a rest, a time for reflection on what we’re praying about,” Sister Jean says. “The reflective silence is just as important as the music.

“I think prayer does more for us than for God,” she adds, smiling. “God is pleased no matter what we do to worship, but because God is beauty, when we make worship as beautiful as possible, it brings the beauty of God more fully to life in us and in those around us.”



Taking their cues from Sister Anne Wambach, director, are Mount Saint Benedict Monastery handbell choir members, left to right, first row: Sisters Irene Spacht, Theresa Zoky, Judith Trambley, Ann Hoffman, and Mary Ellen Plumb, second row: Sisters Diane Cook, Susan Freitag, Margaret Zeller, and Laura Beichner, third row: Mary Jane Vergotz, Ellen Porter, and Susan Doubet.



Lifting souls with musical accompaniment during services in the monastery chapel are, left to right: Sister Jean Wolbert, Oblate Kay Hosterman, Sister Colleen Vogt, Sister Bernadette Sullivan, Sister Anne Wambach, Sister Marilyn Schauble, Oblate Dorothea Reilly (seated), Sister Irene Spacht, Sister Mary Daniel Meahl (seated), Sister Roberta Lavin, Sister Charlotte Zalot, Sister Susan Doubet, Sister Miriam McMullen-Pastrict, Sister Stephanie Schmidt, Sister Anne McCarthy, and Sister Rose Ann Kolbas.

Sister Mary Lou Kownacki

HONORED BY UNITED WAY OF ERIE COUNTY

By Tricia Wood DeMarco

Sister Mary Lou Kownacki has been a driving force behind human service programs in eastside inner-city Erie for more than 30 years. This September the United Way of Erie County recognized her work and vision when it named her the 2004 Alexis de Tocqueville Society outstanding volunteer and community leader.

“In Erie, the Benedictine sisters have worked for 150 years with immigrants of every era, with children of every class, with people helping people in every dimension of life.” —Sister Mary Lou

“Literally hundreds—in fact, thousands over the years—of the poor, the homeless, the hungry and the disadvantaged have known the dignity of a bed, a meal, an education and the respect of other human beings because of her,” according to the United Way. “A visionary, an initiator, an enabler, a convener—Mary Lou Kownacki has the soul of a poet and the heart of a mystic. Inner-city Erie is different because she lives here with an inner-city heart: it has possibility, it has energy and it has someone who loves it dearly for all our sakes.”

Sister Mary Lou is executive director of the Benedictine Sisters’ Inner-city Neighborhood Art House and director of Benetvision publishing. Sister Mary Lou has written books, chapbooks and numerous articles linking spirituality with peace, justice and concern for the poor. This year, her book of poetry, *Between Two Souls: Conversations with Ryokan*, was published by Wm. B. Eerdmans. She began the Benedictine Sisters’ Pax Center peace and justice organization in Erie during the Vietnam War, the Benedictine Sisters’ Emmaus Soup Kitchen in 1974, the Benedictine Sisters’ Inner-City Neighborhood Art House in 1994, and the “One Block at a Time” inner-city neighborhood improvement project in 2001.

“My being here tonight is clear proof of two things,” Sister Mary Lou said upon accepting the de Tocqueville award at the GE Community Center in Erie. “I have had unusually strong models of people



The United Way of Erie County named Sister Mary Lou Kownacki the Alexis de Tocqueville Society outstanding volunteer and leader for 2004.

who staked their lives on public service and I have learned something special from each one of them.”

Sister Mary Lou credited her mother, Mary, and her father, Edward, with keeping their doors open to anyone in need, and modeling civic responsibility and activity to her and her brothers.

“Second, I am a Benedictine sister whose order has given over 1,500 years of public service around the world,” Sister Mary Lou said. “In Erie, the Benedictine sisters have worked for 150 years with immigrants of every era, with children of every class, with people helping people in every dimension of life. Hospitality, stewardship, peace, human community service to those in need are not professions for a Benedictine. They are the air a Benedictine breathes and the life a Benedictine is meant to live.”

“But mostly, I accept this honor because of the children,” Sister Mary Lou added. “I am speaking for children our sisters serve a daily meal to at Sister Gus’ Kids Cafe. I am speaking for children our sisters educate at Saint Benedict’s Child Development Center and East Coast Migrant Head Start. I am speaking for children our sisters provide a home for at House of Healing. I am speaking for children our sisters train for environmental leadership at Lake Erie-Allegheny Earth Force. I am speaking for children whose parents get job training at Saint Benedict Education Center. I am speaking for children who receive free lessons in the arts at the Inner-City Neighborhood Art House.”

“I’m crazy about the children. But I’m also heartsick about their futures,” she said, noting that organizations like the United Way, and the individuals who support it, reaching out to help at-risk children, are critical in making a difference in our community and our world.

“Thank God, good people like you still uphold public service as the highest calling of human life. Let’s all stay with our children and do good,” she said. “Let’s stay with them through our financial support, our volunteer hours, our commitment, our sense of responsibility to a cause greater than ourselves.”

Sister consults both her families in deciding to donate kidney

By Tricia Wood DeMarco

When Sister Mary Ellen Plumb began thinking of donating a kidney to a cousin in desperate need of an organ transplant, her first step was to talk to prioress Sister Christine Vladimiroff about the possibility.

“I wanted to offer my kidney, but not without the community’s affirmation,” Sister Mary Ellen explains. For a Benedictine sister, family takes at least two forms: one is her family of origin and sometimes her own children and grandchildren if she enters a religious community later in life—the other is her family of sisters, with whom she lives, prays and ministers for the rest of her life.

“The things that make me a Benedictine made this need one to which I wanted to respond as fully as I could,” Sister Mary Ellen, 51, reflects. “In some ways it was no different from the daily responses all our sisters strive to make to the needs of others.”

Sister Mary Ellen’s cousin, 41-year-old Marjorie Plumb, had to have both her kidneys removed in 2002 after progressive kidney disease destroyed their functioning. Marjorie ended up on dialysis three days a week. But Marjorie did not want to put someone else through surgery in order to get off dialysis; she was on a list to receive a cadaver kidney should a match become available.

When the family gathered together for Christmas of 2003, Sister Mary Ellen and her cousin took a long walk together to discuss the possibility of donation. Sister Mary Ellen convinced her cousin this was something she really wanted to do.

The next step was determining if the two would be a compatible blood and tissue match. Blood work answered that question, and a truly rare and perfect match was found, despite the fact that Marjorie had been adopted into the Plumb family and there were no shared genetics.

“Daily prayer and contemplation, and the support from my sisters in this community—including Sister Helen Heher in the wellness department—meant I didn’t have to do a lot more than I usually did to get ready for the



Sister Mary Ellen Plumb donated a kidney to a cousin this summer, a choice she made in consultation with both her religious community and the Plumb family.

emotional and physical trauma of surgery,” explains Sister Mary Ellen, who works as director of campus ministry and psychology teacher at Villa Maria Academy in Erie.

Sister Mary Ellen also credits her parents with raising her in an atmosphere in which “you just did what you needed to do to help other people.”

The laparoscopic surgery was a success. Although Marjorie will need to take anti-rejection medication for life so her body will not reject the foreign tissue, her kidney function has already returned to normal.

“A lot of people talk about generosity, courage,” Sister Mary Ellen is quoted as saying in a Sept. 13 front-page article by Kara Rhodes on the donation in the *Erie Times-News*. “But what’s come back to me is one hundred-fold. This has been a major turning point in my life. It’s reinforced the way I live my life.”

CANADIAN OBLATE

FINDS ERIE BENEDICTINES A SOURCE OF HOPE IN VIOLENT WORLD

DESCRIBES EXPERIENCE IN ARTICLE FROM THE CATHOLIC REGISTER IN WATERLOO, ONTARIO

By Ray Cardey, oblate of Mount Saint Benedict



About once a month, I spend a weekend at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery in Erie, Pa., four hours from my home in Waterloo, Ontario.

A husband and father of two daughters, I am a psychologist with a Catholic school board.

My spiritual journey has included

the seminary, a Mennonite house church, and Buddhist meditation. Despite the many challenges facing our Church, I returned to Catholicism because, well, for me it's home. Travel to developing countries, my professional work and volunteer service, have sensitized me to the injustices, inequities and conflict in my community, our world and even, sad to say, in the Church. There are days when I think I have witnessed more suffering than my heart can bear.

Why the monthly drives? The long answer is that I want to deepen my relationship with God, belong to a monastic community actively involved in peace and justice and follow a way of life fostering a rhythm of work, study and prayer. The short answer is that I need a light and a compass: I've been losing hope for our broken Church and world and have found the message of Scripture, as articulated in Saint Benedict's Rule, provides me with a starting place for daily living and hope.

So, last October I became one of 26 new oblates joining about 200 others renewing their commitment to a community of 122 sisters, promising faithfulness to Benedictine prayer and values.

What is an oblate? Oblates are single or married lay persons seeking a deeper experience of God and community through a formal relationship with a monastery. Perhaps the best-known Benedictine oblate is poet Kathleen Norris, who's *Cloister Walk* first piqued my curiosity about Benedictines and oblates. Mount Saint Benedict oblates come from all over North America. Depending on distance, we may support the community's commitment to peace and

justice, help in the development office or monastery infirmary, or work in inner-city ministries such as Emmaus soup kitchen or food bank, or the Inner-City Neighborhood Art House. We study the Rule of Benedict and how it applies to our daily life. We attend retreats and gatherings with oblates and sisters. We pray the Liturgy of the Hours, study the Scriptures and share the Eucharist with the community.

Although I attend Mass regularly in Waterloo, it is my connection with Saint Benedict's that feeds my soul and challenges me to broaden my theological horizons to include Benedictine, creation spirituality and feminist perspectives. The work of Sister Joan Chittister, the most well known member of the community, has been particularly helpful in opening my eyes and heart to new possibilities.

To think I once thought I might be doing the sisters a favor by supporting their work! I have received so much more than I could ever give. The sisters' warmth, hospitality and generosity are evident from the moment you step through the door. Their commitment to peace and justice and the liturgy provide me with a glimpse of what our church can be at its best. When I first saw Sister Christine Vladimiroff, prioress, leading communal prayers with her sisters, I was almost moved to tears. The creative and authoritative voices of women bringing Scripture to life enable me to hear God's voice in a new way.

Daily we witness the ecological and human destruction wrought by autocratic and greedy corporations and governments. As our world lurches from crisis to crisis, perhaps it's time once again to listen to the voices coming from monasteries, bright lights in the darkness. I believe that solutions to our globe's problems must be spiritually based. Just as Saint Benedict demonstrated a radically different way of living in the midst of a declining Roman Empire, so today we have new prophets, such as Chittister and Vladimiroff, grounded in God's love for all of creation. In our broken and fractured world, we ignore their wisdom at our peril.

Sisters' impact felt *personally,* *socially* and *spiritually*



By Tricia Wood DeMarco

Catholic sisters have been there to help me, my extended family, and many of our friends for our entire lives.

Some of this is because I was raised in the Catholic tradition, which—when and how I grew up in Erie, Pa.—meant that the Sisters of Saint Joseph ran and staffed the hospital, Saint Vincent Health Center, where I was born, and Villa Maria College where I had my first “real” job. The Sisters of Mercy administered and taught at my grade school, Saint Luke’s. When a family member struggled financially in the 1980s, it was a weekly parish pantry organized by the Sisters of Mercy that helped with the groceries. When my mother needed to move into an independent living complex for the elderly, the Sisters of Mercy were there for us again through elder living at the Mercy Terrace Apartments. Now, as director of communications for the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, as a member of the Friends’ giving program, and as a newly affirmed Benedictine oblate, I benefit from association with sisters once again, and am given the opportunity to flourish professionally, and develop socially and spiritually.

I know that I am far from alone in these life experiences made better because of women religious, and I’m sure many of you reading this feel the same way. When we examine our lives, we see the impact sisters have made, particularly for the socially and economically marginalized, and for those to whom peace with justice is an elusive, seemingly impossible, concept.

Working with this Benedictine community, I see the crucial web of support the sisters provide to many, many people. I see the children of a young single mother receive loving, tender care at Saint Benedict Child Development Center in inner-city Erie—care she could not afford, or even find, anywhere else. I see another mother helping her five boys through the buffet line in the dignified,

friendly setting of Emmaus Soup Kitchen. I see faithful seekers and spiritual leaders emotionally renewed after a stay at the monastery, a retreat or liturgy experience. I can tell you from behind the scenes that the sisters always put their ministries, and the needs of others, before themselves. And I know that sometimes their work is so constant, steady, expected, the public doesn’t have cause to consider what would happen without them.

But I see other things too. I see maintenance repair needs of a 35-year-old monastery that sorely stretch the prudent and conservative budget of the community. I see sister-volunteers working wherever needed in almost every department and ministry, including the infirmary. I see many sisters who try to limit every personal expense they can by carpooling, using generic medications, and wearing hand-me-down clothing. It is voluntary simplicity and fiscal responsibility at every level.

Almost every one of our 122 sisters works more than one job, extends herself in multiple commitments to others, and virtually never retires. The sisters leave a huge footprint in their assistance to others, while always trying to tread lightly in terms of the environment and use of natural resources.

As I work to learn and follow the Rule of Benedict more faithfully in my daily life, I am comforted by the knowledge that every dollar I am able to donate to this religious community supports not only the sisters, but also all the people they help.

Take a minute to think about how sisters have helped you, your loved ones, and your community. Then do what you can to assist the sisters in continuing their works for others. For more information on becoming a Friend of the monastery, call Sister Mary Jane Vergotz, director of development for the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, at (814) 899-0614, Ext. 409, or visit our secure-site donation options under “*How You Can Help*” at ErieBenedictines.org.



*Benedictine
Sisters of Erie*



**Listen carefully, my child,
to my instructions,
and attend to them with
the ear of your heart.**

Rule of Benedict: Prologue

When you help support the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, you help the causes of peace and justice by extension.

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie are 122 women working in and as a community, seeking God together through a tradition of prayer, and providing ministries vital to the spiritual and temporal well being of others.

Thousands of people visit the monastery each year for liturgical gatherings and retreats, spiritual guidance and inspiration. Many of these visitors began their Benedictine journey through the writings and leadership of Sister Joan Chittister. More than 200 lay people have made formal relationships with the monastery community through commitments to follow the tenets of the Rule of Benedict as oblates.

Inner-city ministries serve segments of the population for whom services are largely lacking and advocacy is missing—educating

young mothers, providing cultural opportunities for economically disadvantaged children, feeding the hungry.

In order to continue all of this outreach, the sisters need to ask for your financial support. Please consider:

- **A cash donation of \$25, \$50, \$100 or more.**
- **Remembering us in your will or estate plans.**
- **Donating a gift of cash, stock, securities or mutual funds.**
- **Entering a charitable gift annuity.**
- **Naming us as the beneficiary of a life-insurance policy or charitable trust.**

For information on giving, call Sister Mary Jane Vergotz, director of development for the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, at (814) 899-0614, Ext. 409. Visit ErieBenedictines.org under the “*How to Help*” heading to make secure-site, online donations.



Mount Saint Benedict Monastery

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