Hospitality is not simply a matter of opening the door, but of opening the heart. — Joan Chittister
Welcome to the Winter 2022 issue of The Mount. This issue highlights all-encompassing hospitality, the welcoming and warmth of which is artfully symbolized in Brother Mickey McGrath’s cover artwork.

The Christmas season is when we remember Joseph and Mary looking for welcome and not finding it. Two thousand years later, hospitality remains scarce. Our lives are so busy, we say. We have so much to do, so many meetings and tasks, places to be, responsibilities…. We can’t simply drop everything to offer hospitality to the guest or stranger, can we?

There is certainly a literal aspect to Benedict’s call to hospitality as Sister Stephanie writes on the facing page. He did want his monks to welcome those who came to the monastery, real people who came—and still come—with real needs.

Throughout this issue of The Mount, we offer stories of ordinary people who met and welcomed God in the practice of hospitality as well as through the cultivation of a hospitality mindset. “I think most of the spiritual life is really a matter of relaxing…of letting go, ceasing to cling, ceasing to insist on our way, ceasing to tense ourselves up for this or against that…,” Beatrice Bruteau writes in Radical Optimism. I invite you to relax, clear your mind of past and future, and welcome the “guests” you find in this issue. Be hospitable, invite them in, engage them in conversation, and see what gifts they hold for you.

Thanks to 11 goats and a host of volunteers, efforts organized by our Care for the Earth committee, the path and woods along Sevenmile creek are ready to welcome guests again, see page 10.

The love and acceptance—hospitality—that a four-year-old felt at St. Benedict Child Development Center 40 years ago has come full circle in Michelle Basista, Development Associate, who feels “called to work with sisters, to help them raise funds to support their monastic life and ministry.” See page 4.

Although the majority of our readers are not St. Benedict Academy Alumnae (the school closed in 1988), the stories on the SBA pages in this issue provide testimony to the impact and transformative potential of women’s empowerment. The graduates of St. Ben’s continue to make a difference in our world. See page 20.

My email is lromej@eriebenedictines.org should you need to contact me.

Christmas and New Year’s blessings to you!

Linda Romey, OSB
Editor
One of the most familiar phrases from the Rule of Benedict is, “Let all guests be received as Christ,” from Chapter 53. Benedict insisted that hospitality be an essential practice in his monasteries.

The monastery was to be a place of welcome and acceptance for all, not a secluded place to which one runs in order to avoid people. Benedict invites us to come out of ourselves to receive the guest, the other, the stranger, the marginalized, the immigrant, the orphan—to see each person as a new revelation of the face of Christ. This means putting aside our personal schedule as we listen to the visitor at the door, and although the arrival of the stranger looks like an interruption, a bother, an inconvenience or problem, it really is an invitation. To accept this invitation to growth one needs a basic posture of openness, a willingness to listen deeply and to love without distinction.

When we offer true hospitality, we create a sacred space in our hearts, a place of reverence for the other that enriches us as much or more than it touches the guest. As we receive the guest with love and empathy, we open ourselves to the possibility of a transformative relationship.

Our world can be very small—and comfortable—when we surround ourselves only with people who think and look like us.

Hospitality is about openness, not just opening the door but opening our lives, our minds, and our hearts. It calls us to be open to the new ideas and the wisdom of others, to questions and searching, to diversity and different cultures, to new technology and collaboration, to the cries and needs of our Mother Earth.

Hospitality invites us into dialogue with those who think differently, believe differently, worship differently. To go beyond limiting labels of sexual orientation, skin color, nationality, political affiliation, economic status. To struggle against our tendency to judge and critique others. To move beyond our comfort zones and change our thinking. Pope Francis encourages this “culture of encounter” as an essential part of gospel living on the path to conversion. Benedict would agree.

A few questions to ponder:

- How do we connect and build relationships with those who are different than us?
- How do we put the needs of others before our self-interest?
- How do we see the face of Christ in everyone we meet?

In peace,

Sister Stephanie Schmidt, OSB
Prioress
by Linda Romey, OSB

It's been 40 years since Michelle Basista and her twin sister, Katie Houle, first encountered a Benedictine presence at St. Benedict Child Development Center (SBCDC) on East 9th Street in Erie.

"What I remember most clearly is Mrs. Lollypop (Laracena Tate), my favorite teacher. She was kind and loving and I thought she had the best name!" said Michelle, who has been Development Associate for the Benedictine Sisters of Erie since January 2021. "When I took the position," she explained, "I didn’t initially make the connection that I had first met the Benedictines as a four-year-old in 1981 when I attended their day care center. I simply felt called to work with sisters, to help them raise the funds necessary to support their monastic life and ministry."

"In 1969 when Sister Alice Schierberl began what became SBCDC, she was responding out of a heart that had been shaped by decades of living a life of prayer and community. The children and their parents may not have been able to identify what made Benedictine day care different from other day cares, but they could feel it," explained Sister Diane Rabe, who succeeded Sister Alice as director of SBCDC in 1990 and served as director for 29 years. Benedictine values undergird all the sisters’ ministries and inform the daily interactions and the decisions the sisters and staff make.

"Benedictine values definitely impacted me as a youngster at SBCDC," Michelle says. "I remember my class being very diverse. All skin colors were represented and I remember feeling that everyone belonged and was accepted. It wasn’t until later on in my life that I realized that not everyone is accepting of people who are a different race or nationality. I remember feeling very confused at this later realization, since acceptance came naturally to me."

It’s fun to think that Michelle’s early Benedictine connection influenced her return to the monastery. When she was still young, her family moved to Pittsburgh where she grew up and went on to earn degrees in Religious Studies and Pastoral Ministry. She married Pete, her high school sweetheart. After
The new director at St. Benedict Child Development Center (SBCDC) has a history with Benedictines: Carrisa Kepple, who became director last June, grew up in St. Marys, Pennsylvania, home of the first settlement of Benedictine women in the United States. “I talked to my grandmother, who is 94 and still lives in St. Marys, before my interview and she told me I had to take the job, this was the Benedictines!” Carrisa explained. Her grandmother then went on to give her a Benedictine history lesson. “I feel like I’ve come full circle,” she said.

“We selected Carrisa for this position because of her strong background in child care and administration and for the beautiful presence she brought to her interview,” said Sister Diane Rabe, subprioress and former SBCDC director. “Her Benedictine roots are a bonus!”

Carrisa expertly manages the various filled-to-capacity programs at SBCDC. There are 112 children from infant to five-year-olds with three staff in every classroom. “Floaters” who fill in where needed, along with administration, maintenance and kitchen staff, make 35 staff members. “I’m very hands on when it comes to the teachers and the children,” Carrisa explains. “I want to know all their names. I want to know who the children’s parents are, to speak with the parents.”

The diversity Michelle remembered in 1981 (see previous page), still exists in terms of ethnicity and culture, language, ability, and economics. There are bilingual teachers, including an American Sign Language teacher. “Everyone is welcome here—until we hit capacity,” said Carrisa. “We work with the Erie School District to implement early intervention for some of our children, which is a huge help so that they’re prepared to go to kindergarten. I’ve had calls from kindergarten teachers saying they can tell that a child went to a good preschool because they already knew their simple sounds or letters.”

To learn how you can help support Benedictine community life, prayer, and ministry at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery, or if you’d simply like to get to know Michelle, she can be reached at the monastery, 814-899-0614 ext. 2281, or mbasista@eriebenedictines.org.
The Erie Benedictine community welcomed Sister Kathleen McCarthy to full membership when she celebrated her final monastic profession during Evening Praise on Saturday, October 1, at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery. She promised a lifetime of conversion through the monastic way of life, stability in community, and obedience in listening to God’s voice in her life.

“I am thankful for so many people who have been part of my journey over the years. I am thankful to now be called to this community and monastic living for the rest of my life,” she said.

Sister Kathleen came to the Erie Benedictines after 36 years with L’Arche, a community where people with and without disabilities share life together. An Erie Benedictine who was an early member of L’Arche with Kathleen, Sister Barbara Ann Karznia, helped ground her in Benedictine spirituality and values.

One of nine children, Kathleen came to community already knowing the Benedictine way, from Sister Barbara and others. Her sister, Anne, has been a member for more than 30 years. Kathleen herself lived with the Erie Benedictines at Pax Priory in the 1990s. Eventually she became part of the L’Arche community in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, where she lived until she joined the Benedictines in 2016.

The profession ritual is rich in symbolism and includes a candle lighting with the invocation of the Holy Spirit, acknowledging that monastic profession is a deepening of the baptismal commitment. After reading aloud and signing the document on which she had written her monastic profession, which the prioress then sealed with the community seal, Sister Kathleen sang the Suscipe three times: “Uphold me O God according to your word and I shall live. And do not fail me in my hope,” Psalm 119: 116.

The community ring was blessed before Sister Kathleen received it from the prioress, and then each member of the community came forth to bless and welcome her.

After the final prayer, Sister Stephanie Schmidt, prioress, presented Sister Kathleen with her title, a
The tradition in the Erie Benedictine community. The prioress chooses the title based on qualities that she already recognizes in the sister making profession and that she can continue to grow into. She gave the title “of Christ the compassionate companion” to Sister Kathleen. “It is a great joy to welcome Kathy into full membership in our community. She brings a wealth of lived experience and a heart full of compassion,” said Sister Stephanie. Family and friends unable to be present attended the ceremony via live stream.

— St. Benedict Child Development Center, continued from page 5

But other things have changed in 40 years—like new concerns for safety. In addition to the tornado and fire drills that have been practiced for decades, today’s children practice active shooter drills. “We have to lock doors, turn off lights, and get the children in one corner,” said Carrisa. “It takes a long time for the little ones to get comfortable with the lights being off, especially in the downstairs classrooms that get pretty dark. We practice lights off throughout the day, on random days, to help get them used to it. But I think the kids, especially the ones who have older siblings, unfortunately already know too much about why we’re practicing this drill. You can’t really explain it to them. Most important is that we want them to feel safe when they come in.”

In addition to providing loving care and safety during the daytime hours, the staff at SBCDC also takes care to pay attention to what may or may not be happening in the children’s homes. They will provide extra snacks if a child needs food at home, for example. “If the parents need something, whether it be socks, underwear, whatever they need, I want them to know they can ask,” Carrisa says. “We’ll just pack it in the child’s bag and not make a big deal of it, just send it home.” The St. Benedict Academy Alumnae Association has been raising money to help provide personal care products, diapers, and other items the children may need.

The Rule of Benedict begins with the word, “listen,” and that is something that the teachers and staff at SBCDC practice daily. It’s also what Carrisa suggests that all of us do—listen well to the children around us, listen to their joys, their fears, their questions. Listen with an open mind and seek to communicate in a way that will help the child know that they are safe, that they are loved. “I know from teachers, from the parents, even the new parents that have started bringing their children, that it feels very warm and welcoming here, and that’s very comforting. And they are happy to know their child is in good hands. That’s a good feeling,” says Carrisa.

“Listen well to the children, listen to their joys, their fears, their questions.”
—Carrisa Kepple
Hospitality is the art and science of making people feel welcome. No one does it better than the Catholic Worker Movement, Benedictine oblate Dorothy Day’s social justice genius made flesh in houses of hospitality. When it comes to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, non-binary, gender fluid, and myriad other people living good lives in a challenging world, a warm welcome is in order. Some among us know how to do it well.

When a church has to have a sign out in front that says “All Are Welcome” something is radically wrong. Isn’t everyone welcome by definition in the house of the Divine, in communities of love and justice? Apparently not.

It is wonderful to find these signs in neighborhoods—inner city, suburban, or rural—where people read their own moral compasses in the absence of denominational guidance. Many people are embarrassed that their institutional churches dismiss all who do not conform to a narrow sense of the good when it comes to love of self and others. They give clear witness in a sign that their church has open arms and a well-oiled door regardless.

These signs are the opposite of “No Irish Need Apply” that were in store windows or factories in the 19th century. Immigrants from Italy, Poland, and other countries faced the same exclusion. Apparently some Christians have learned nothing about a warm welcome and robust hospitality. Benedict said: “All guests who arrive should be received as Christ,” which is what the Gospels look like when they are embodied.

Today’s signs are meant to indicate that those who have been branded as sexual/gender outliers are indeed welcome despite the express rejection of some religious groups.

The welcome mats take many forms. The most obvious way of signaling acceptance is to use the names and pronouns people use for themselves. Many of us get tongue-tied trying to undo the best efforts of our English teachers when we refer to individuals as ‘they’ rather than he or she. Effort, not perfection, is the heart of hospitality. After all, lots of cups of tea have spilled on the rugs since the Sisters of Mercy founder Venerable Catherine McAuley started her order in Dublin to welcome those who were poor, sick, or in need of education. No worries, just refill the pot and extend the welcome again and again.

Another route to inclusion is the conscious recognition that generations of queer people have been treated appallingly in the name of God. For example, elder lesbians and gay men in our midst carry the pain of exclusion, the sting of rejection, the wounds of hiding, and the bitterness of opportunities prohibited. Much of that happened in the name of a deity I do not recognize by churches that violated their reasons for being. It is time to redress those wrongs and make reparations. At least young people will learn what justice is even if the elders are gone.

Imagine if we had known that some of our greatest spiritual and religious leaders were LGBTIQ+ people. Now that we are learning more about them, it is time to celebrate them in their fullness and let their lights shine even more brightly with the bushel baskets removed.

An untold truth about hospitality is that many who have been excluded spend their lives making sure it never happens to anyone else. Some working on the borders, some who meet the buses as immigrants arrive in big cities, others who run the shelters for the unhoused and food pantries for those who suffer scarcity are the same LGBTIQ+ people who know what it is to be unwelcome. We will not let it happen to others on our watch as the long as Brigit’s cloak can still extend over more and more of creation.

by Mary E. Hunt, Ph.D.
Guest Columnist

Hospitality Writ Large

Mary E. Hunt, Ph.D.
Cofounder and Codirector
WATER, Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual
waterwomensalliance.org
The East 22nd Street Poetry Park received 15 new poems on ginkgo leaf plaques affixed to stones along with a newly planted ginkgo tree next to which a haiku written by Erie Benedictine Sister Mary Lou Kownacki is now displayed:

**Haiku in the Poetry Park**

The East 22nd Street Poetry Park received 15 new poems on ginkgo leaf plaques affixed to stones along with a newly planted ginkgo tree next to which a haiku written by Erie Benedictine Sister Mary Lou Kownacki is now displayed:

**In the poetry park**

8-year-old Burmese refugee
flies a kite

Dave Davis of Gene Davis Metal Fabricator waited until August 15 to affix the final plaque bearing Sister Mary Lou’s haiku to a stone so that Sister Mary Lou’s brothers, Ed and Jerry, and her nephew Justin and great-niece Caroline, could join some of the sisters for the installation.

The park, in the 600 block of East 22nd Street, was dedicated 10 years ago and has since provided a safe and beautiful space for the children, and sometimes adults, in this impoverished inner-city neighborhood. Its meandering path is lined with metal-sculptured flowers with poems on their petals, and stones with plaques bearing poems as well as stones for sitting. There’s a small stage, too, where poetry readings have taken place, all enclosed in a variety of trees, flowers, and shrubs.

Sister Mary Lou and Sister Mary Miller are the visionaries and impetus behind the poetry park which was created under the auspices of the Trinity Square Foundation, a non-profit organization formed to reclaim the neighborhood from violence and crime. Current board members are Anne McCarthy, OSB, president, Dale McBrier, Roberto Ramos, Jon Gruza, Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, OSB, Katie Gordon, Margarita Dangel, Mary Miller, OSB and Erin Carey.
Goats on the Grounds

A herd of goats and goatherds from Buffalo, NY, spent a month this summer clearing invasive species, such as Japanese knotweed, invasive honeysuckle, and multiflora rose that were threatening the health of the trees along Sevenmile Creek and preventing people from enjoying walks in the woods.

The invasive species overtake the native plant population, killing off trees by sucking up the water and covering the leaves with their own, blocking their ability to take in nutrients from the sun. Weakened by these invasive species, the trees die, which worsens the soil health, removes the habitats of animals, makes the trails difficult to access, and speeds up the erosion of the creek.

Sister Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, a member of the community’s Care for the Earth committee who has spent many hours manually removing these invasive plants, began researching more effective ways to save the forest. Pesticides or heavy machinery would have created more damage. She discovered Let’s Goat Buffalo and proposed hiring goats. “This was a creative, natural way to manage our land and improve its health,” Sister Jacqueline said.

Eleven goats worked at Glinodo, including 10 who were selected to come, and one who snuck onto the bus while it was being loaded and wasn’t noticed until he was already hard at work in Erie. He and the rest of the herd happily spent the bulk of each day eating leaves, thorns, and berries off of the invasive rose bushes, and standing on their hind legs to nibble poison ivy off of trees.

They were hemmed in by a movable solar-powered electric fence that kept them from wandering too far away from the task at hand. In just a few days, they can chew their way through about 100 yards of what was once overgrown, thorny bramble. The goatherd then moved the fencing. They spent nights in their “barn,” a bus whose front end has been refurbished as a tight but sufficient living quarters for the goatherd and whose back end serves as a barn for the goats.

Goats are especially effective at clearing invasive plants because they love to graze, it’s pretty much all they do. Periodically they stop and lie down to ruminate,” explained goatherd Jennifer Zeitler. While the goats ruminate, their digestive system goes to work and destroys any possibility of seeds passing through them and reseeding the same invasive plants they are ingesting. Quite monk-like as we, too, are grazing continually on everything our senses take in. And we ruminate, too. The trick for us is to choose our ruminations wisely so that we don’t reseed the negativity that thrives in our world like an invasive species.

The goats’ digestive systems have the advantage of processing what they eat in such a way that any chance of reseeding from excrement is impossible. It is a win-win solution.

The John M. and Gertrude E. Petersen Fund of the Erie Community Foundation partnered with the sisters to fund the effort. “We are grateful for their support of this unique project,” said Development Associate Michelle Basista.

Visit letsgoatbuffalo.com to learn more.
Jennifer Zeitler follows what gives her energy—in other words, she “runs while she has the light of life,” as Saint Benedict instructs in his Rule. She is the creative visionary behind Let’s Goat Buffalo (letsgoatbuffalo.com), the goats-for-rent business that she founded in 2018 and whose goats spent a month this summer clearing the woods of invasive species along Sevenmile Creek on the Benedictine Sisters’ Glinodo grounds.

The goat renting business is not something Jen consciously sought. More accurately, it found her and, finding it gave her energy, she followed it. “I had to have faith and trust in myself to know that if I took the risk and lost it all, I wouldn’t have lost all my skills and knowledge and experience and background. We can always find solutions in times of crisis. And the idea that we’re all that secure in any given situation is false,” she explained. She was raising bees as a hobby but had a hard time accessing the apiary that was overgrown with underbrush. Someone suggested goats and her research suggested that would be the most practical solution. In looking for goats to rent, she found none but she was offered animals that had “aged out” and were no longer productive farm animals and who would be sacrificed. So she fell into “rescue goats” and now her herd is made up of 20 such “non-productive” animals whom she names and cares for and who work with her and her two staff persons.

This is what it’s like to walk along Sevenmile Creek in October after a summer’s worth of work. There’s easy access to clearly defined, wood-chip covered trails. The creek is flowing, the leaves are turning. Many of the trees planted in 2021 as part of the ReLeaf effort to plant one tree for every citizen of Erie County (275,000 trees) continue to thrive in their protective sheaths.

Students help with Glinodo trails improvement

Once the goats had cleared away leaves and vegetation along Sevenmile Creek, sisters and volunteers began removing some of the roots, and other plants will die as they no longer have leaves. With access to the trail again, they edged it with logs and spread wood chips along the path. Recent volunteers included:

- Eleven students from Harborcreek Youth Services and their teacher, Ken Link, spent a day working along the creek.
- On the Mercyhurst Day of Service, 36 new Mercyhurst University students and instructors Mike Campbell and Laurie Baker spent a morning clearing and lining trails.
- Twenty water polo players participating in Gannon University Gives Day continued the clearing and improving effort.

“The work these young people offered made the trails and area around the creek more accessible. We are grateful for the help of these students and all the others who have come out to spend some time clearing, moving logs, spreading wood chips, and pulling roots. It makes it easier for people to enjoy the incredible natural beauty along the creek,” said Sister Annette Marshall, chair of the community’s Care for the Earth Committee.

Everything on earth is filled with sacred presence. Let us bow down and worship.
— Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB
The Oblate Way of Life
with the Benedictine Sisters of Erie

Community Weekend 2022

More than 50 oblates participated in the 2022 October Community Weekend at the monastery.

On Friday, oblates, sisters, and volunteers involved in various works hosted displays and invited others to join their efforts. Interests represented were Artisans of the Monastery, Benedictines for Peace, Care for the Earth, Discerning Deacons Phoebe Circle, Erie Benedictine Study Group, Monasteries of the Heart/Listening Hearts, and Prison Ministry.

On Saturday, Sister Joan Chittister guided oblates and sisters through a process that in itself illustrated synodality as she reviewed the Councils of Trent and Vatican I and how they relate to the movement of the Church today under the leadership of Pope Francis. Her presentation “Roots and Wings” highlighted the as-yet unrealized wisdom of the documents of Vatican II and the potential we have at this moment to become the Church they envision.

At the Oblate Commitment Ceremony on Saturday evening, the commitments of 260 oblates were presented, four new oblates were welcomed, and three persons became oblate initiates.

For more information, contact Oblate Co-Directors:
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On Being 90
by Colleen Ahearn, Oblate

Arriving at age 90 intact (my brain has not atrophied) is first of all a gift. After good health all my life I was, at age 84, subjected to health challenges requiring hospitalizations. I felt like I was coming to the end of my life. But by the grace of God and with the help of several doctors I lived beyond that critical time. There is spiritual mystery in this extension of life that adds to its giftedness.

In my present life there is a mixture of joys and afflictions. Chronic insomnia determines my readiness to function each day. The aging process takes its toll on my stamina and agility. I try to adapt to these changes.

My physical limitations create obstacles in transporting myself to the monastery. Walking a great distance saps my strength so I sit in my walker and rest before going on. In these challenges I feel grateful for my rolling walker.

I walk slowly. I eat slowly. I CANNOT HURRY. I struggle with humility to accept my aging body’s lessening mobility. My absence in the chapel has been a painful loss for me.

I live in a small apartment so I have few steps to do my work. I feel thankful that I am able to do my house chores. In my time of deathly sickness, I could do none of them. My needs were and some still are provided for by family and friends. Among my caregivers are the adult children and grandchildren of my siblings. Having known them as children it gives me great joy to be befriended and helped by them as mature adults. They carry the self-giving tradition of our family in a most kindly way.

The slowing of my body and the danger of covid-19 have greatly reduced my activity in the world. My confinement has given me time for reflection. In reviewing a 90-year sweep what stands out is the spiritual thread that runs through it. Looking back at my years of angry struggling with God I now feel grateful to recognize myself loved by God through it all.

At this point in life, I feel I am hovering toward heaven. I am cognizant that life’s ending is a given and moving in that direction is still daunting but less fearsome. The physical pain that might be part of it is what I most fear.

I feel the Benedictine influence begun at Saint Gertrude’s Monastery in Maryland and continued at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery in Erie has given me what I most needed, mindfulness of the presence of God as Saint Benedict stressed in his Rule when he wrote, “We keep the reverence of God always before our eyes.” It is my guiding star.

I feel grateful and blessed to be a friend and an oblate of the Erie Benedictine community.

I offer Saint Paul’s prayer for the Philippians: May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. —Phil. 4:7

Sharing Benedictine Spirituality

Oblate Katie Holzheimer was the invited speaker at the Serra Club East in Cleveland, OH, on October 24. She had been asked to speak on the topic of, “My Journey into Benedictine Spirituality.”

She opened with a short biography of her life, having been raised in the Catholic tradition. “Then I described finding Benedictine spirituality after hearing Sister Joan Chittister interviewed on the radio,” she said. What stayed with her from the interview, she told the group, was Sister Joan’s description of the need to ask difficult questions, particularly questions about women’s role in the church.

Katie followed her story with a short biography of Saint Benedict and some of the themes of Benedictine spirituality, making them real with descriptions of the Erie Benedictines and their many ministries. She spoke briefly about the Rule, focusing on the 12 steps of humility, which she illustrated with a situation in her life where humility played a part in her care of a certain patient. “I took questions afterwards, and I felt like I was well received by the group. I felt proud to represent the Erie Benedictines,” Katie said.

Serra Club is an international Catholic lay organization dedicated to supporting and encouraging vocations to the priesthood and religious life. In Cleveland it meets monthly and includes Mass, a meal, and a speaker.
I recently returned from a pilgrimage in Mexico City with Discerning Deacons, an organization whose mission is to engage Catholics in the active discernment of our Church about women and the diaconate. Our theme was Saint Phoebe goes to Guadalupe!

Saint Phoebe was an active leader in the early church, as Saint Paul says in his letter to the Romans: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of God’s people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.” Did you know that we had women deacons in the early church and until the 12th century?

I was blessed to journey with women from Brazil, Colombia, Bolivia and the United States as well as the Archbishop of Brazil, and several priests and laymen from the U.S. We worshipped together, shared our experiences of ministry and of Church, and ate good food. What a joy it was to experience the diversity and unity of the Church.

I came home with a deep awe for the women of the Amazon who are contributing so powerfully to their local churches and fostering dialogue in our global Church. One result of the Amazon Synod in 2019 was that clergy and laity repeatedly affirmed that women are already doing the work of deacons in the region. In response to that Synod’s formal request to share their “experiences and reflections” with a papal commission on women and the diaconate, Pope Francis replied, “I will take on the request to reconvene the commission, perhaps with new members… I pick up the challenge… The women have put up a sign and said, ‘Please listen to us. May we be heard.’ And I pick up that gauntlet.”

To be on pilgrimage with so many women and men in ministry who love our Catholic Church and express that love by serving the People of God and by seeking to foster synodal dialogue about restoring women to the diaconate was inspiring. The pilgrimage continues as I share with others my personal experience in Mexico City with Saint Phoebe, Saint Juan Diego, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Learn more at discerningdeacons.org

Requiescant in Pace

Oblate Diane Cunningham  
Grand Rapids, MI  
Died June 21, 2022

Oblate Beth Jordan  
Santa Rosa, CA  
Died September 1, 2022

Oblate Patricia Whitehill  
Erie, PA  
Died September 23, 2022
An Interview with Amanda Bolaños and Ailie Posillico
2022 Joan Chittister Writers-in-Residence*

“What are you doing for women?”

by Katie Gordon

“‘So, what are you doing for women?’ When Sister Joan Chittister met one of the Writers-in-Residence this summer, this was her first question.

Sister Joan has addressed many aspects of contemporary spirituality throughout her life, and her advocacy for the oppressed—especially women—is continuing in younger generations of thinkers and activists.

This past summer, two such scholars lived in the monastery for one month each, deepening in their respective fields of study while experiencing the daily rhythm of monastic life: Amanda Bolaños, a Th.D. student at Duke Divinity School, and Ailie Posillico, a Ph.D. student at Villanova University. The following is an excerpt from an interview with them; Scan the QR code to read the full interview.

What was your writing project, and how do you hope it will contribute to women in spirituality and theology?

What did it mean to you to do this at the monastery?

Amanda: I studied Dorothy Day, and aspects of liberation theology, feminist theology, and monasticism related to her life. Through the focused space for one month in that environment, a friendship formed with Dorothy.

Now I’m working on a project about how Dorothy has helped me deconstruct female holiness. Growing up I was taught and conditioned that “virgin” and “martyr” were the epitome of the female saint. But Dorothy challenges that on all fronts: she was a sexual human being, she was very loud, she took up space. I think drawing attention to her can expand the church’s narrative of what female holiness should be, and hopefully challenges it.

All saints have been chosen by men in the history of the Catholic Church, and so it’s the male gaze of what the female holiness ought to be, which is a narrow narrative. It’s been healing to look at Dorothy and analyze her holiness for myself.

This project was so refreshing to do at the monastery, because I felt so comfortable, and it was because I was surrounded by so many women who were not afraid to use their voice. Like when we had Liturgy of the Word and they were preaching, that was an amazing experience. And how we prayed in the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sanctifier. I’ve just never felt so uplifted. It was the most beautiful witness of church, of what church should be. Being with the sisters, I witnessed their unashamed femininity and how they lived out the Gospel, unapologetically and joyfully.

Ailie: I translated letters by a 14th century German priest Henry of Nördlingen, who was reading Mechthild of Magdeburg and translating her work for Beguines, nuns, and other priests. I translated about 15 letters, which was really beautiful to do in a rhythmic and almost meditative, contemplative way, because translation does require deep work.

My research is taking seriously women’s writing as historical and theological, and in that way, reshaping the canon. Not by just inserting women into it, but actually by saying that the canon that we have in Christianity has been shaped by women, whether they have been writers, or weavers, or seamstresses.

Currently, I’m drawing from these letters for a chapter in my dissertation. On the side, I’m doing a creative project, responding to Henry in the voice of a Beguine today. For this, I’m drawing on a lot of my experience from the monastery. I feel like this creative project is the life that is going to sustain me through the dissertation writing project. This is something that I could only have felt supported to do from the sisters, because from them I saw such a heart of creativity and appreciation for art.

Scan the QR code to read the full interview.

*A mission of the Joan Chittister Writer-in-Residency program is to provide women writers with the space and means to commit themselves to a meaningful project of their design, building on the foundations laid by Joan Chittister in her writing on women, spirituality, and justice. The opportunity is advertised annually at joanchittister.org.

*Amanda Bolaños, left, volunteered at Emmaus Soup Kitchen with Sisters Susan Doubet and Val Luckey.
The Alliance for International Monasticism, U.S. Secretariat (AIM USA) held their annual board meeting at the monastery in September. Present were (standing, left to right) Mariana Olivo Espinosa, OSB, Torreon, Mexico; Anne Shepard, OSB, Atchison, KS; Joel Macul, OSB, Schuyler, NE; Ann Hoffman, OSB, AIM USA Executive Director. Seated, Nettie Gamble, OCSO, Dubuque, IA; Christine Kosin, OSB, AIM USA staff, and Michael Marie Rottinghaus, OSB, Norfolk, NE. On the screen (clockwise) Susan Quaintance, OSB, Chicago, IL; Stan Gumula, OCSO, Esmeraldas, Ecuador; Macario Martines, OSB, Benet Lake Abbey; and Stephanie Schmidt, OSB, Erie Prioress. Paul Richards, OSB, Collegeville, MN, did not attend. AIM USA represents 140 US and Canadian monasteries linked to 450 monasteries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe.

Pax Christi USA honors Erie Benedictine sisters and oblates

Erie Benedictine Oblate Jo Clarke, Sister Anne McCarthy, and Oblate Barbara Richardson (left to right) were named Ambassadors of Peace at the Pax Christi USA 50th Anniversary Conference in Washington, DC, August 5-7. Sister Anne, who is also a former national coordinator for Pax Christi USA, said, “Our community’s relationship with Pax Christi USA is deep and long. To receive this honor with two of our oblates and share it with previous Ambassadors of Peace Sister Mary Lou Kownacki and Oblates Nancy Small and Phyllis Jepson affirms the Benedictine charism of peace, and is a connection with Pax Christi and the movement for peace and justice. I treasured my time working with Pax Christi USA.” Sister Anne currently coordinates Benedictines for Peace in Erie.

AIM-USA Board Meeting

The Alliance for International Monasticism, U.S. Secretariat (AIM USA) held their annual board meeting at the monastery in September. Present were (standing, left to right) Mariana Olivo Espinosa, OSB, Torreon, Mexico; Anne Shepard, OSB, Atchison, KS; Joel Macul, OSB, Schuyler, NE; Ann Hoffman, OSB, AIM USA Executive Director. Seated, Nettie Gamble, OCSO, Dubuque, IA; Christine Kosin, OSB, AIM USA staff, and Michael Marie Rottinghaus, OSB, Norfolk, NE. On the screen (clockwise) Susan Quaintance, OSB, Chicago, IL; Stan Gumula, OCSO, Esmeraldas, Ecuador; Macario Martines, OSB, Benet Lake Abbey; and Stephanie Schmidt, OSB, Erie Prioress. Paul Richards, OSB, Collegeville, MN, did not attend. AIM USA represents 140 US and Canadian monasteries linked to 450 monasteries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe.

Emmaus Ministries

The Emmaus Soup Kitchen re-opened to full capacity in October and as you can see, the dining room is overflowing with life again. And yes, those are burning bushes in full color outside the windows—we are surrounded in beauty!
**Sister Joan Chittister energizes Australians**

In her six-week Australian speaking tour this summer, Sister Joan Chittister gave new hope and energy to thousands of Australians as she criss-crossed the country. Speaking in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney, and Brisbane, she addressed communities of women religious and gave multiple interviews. “Sister Joan is asking us to live church teaching and live it faithfully and more abundantly—its roots are in the gospels and the theology of Vatican II,” said one religious superior. “As she says, ‘this Council called upon the church to be the church that the church was meant to be.’” Gail Grossman Freyne, Ph.D., LL.B., Vice President of Catholics for Renewal and a close friend of Sister Joan who coordinated the tour, commented afterwards that, “Each person came to the gatherings to be confirmed, to be reassured, to be blessed so that they could try, one more time, in hope, to take “wings” within the best of the Catholic tradition. They believe Sister Joan when she tells them that we have roots and we have wings—to engage in the ongoing work of co-creation of God’s world.”

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**Silent Peace Walk Anniversary**

Benedictines for Peace celebrated the 5th Anniversary of its monthly Silent Peace Walks on August 29 in the eastside neighborhood where the Benedictine Sisters have lived and worked for over 160 years. Benedictines for Peace also has a new website, benedictinesforpeace.com

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**2022 Prophet of Peace**

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie honored Candace Battles (right) with their 2022 Prophet of Peace Award. “Candace has been serving our community, especially women and children, for many years. She was always there to assist a mother in need when I called on her to help the women in the House of Healing program more than 15 years ago,” said Sister Stephanie Schmidt, prioress (left) when presenting the award to Candace. Sister Stephanie acknowledged Candace’s current efforts with Our West Bayfront, and many other organizations, boards, and programs that have benefitted from the love and generosity she has offered the Erie community. The Benedictine Sisters give the annual Prophet of Peace award to an individual or group that embodies some aspect of their current corporate commitment to be a healing presence and prophetic witness for peace and justice by actively addressing the climate crisis and the rights of women and children.
I Spy Quilt offers fun challenge for children

Michelle Basista, Erie Benedictines Development Associate, holds an “I Spy” quilt designed and stitched by her mother, Mary Tomlin, and her friends Barb Mattis and Dawn Julius. “The quilt is so clever,” said Michelle. “Scattered throughout are appliquéd items for the children to find—an ice cream cone, a heart, a star, an apple. The quilters included a list of all the items hidden in the quilt, too.”

The quilt will hang in the hallway at St. Benedict Child Development Center. Carrisa Kepple, Center Director, watches while children hunt for hidden items.

“Transition” Art Show

Sister Margaret Ann Pilewski’s art show “Transition,” featuring 52 new pieces born of her reflections on the current transitions in her life, runs through November 20. “After 27 years of teaching and administering at the Neighborhood Art House, which followed years of teaching, I turned to a new season, a season of focusing on my art,” she said. Sister Peggy’s newest technique is acrylic pouring, a process that involves letting the paint go, an apt metaphor for times of transition like retirement. “It was a new experience, letting the paint travel to the canvas, create its own mix, be paint,” she said. “Transition” is in the Chapter 57 Gallery, open every Sunday after liturgy until noon through Sunday, November 20. Call 814-440-3114 to arrange other days and times to see the show.

BENEDICTINE IMPACT

When you read this issue of The Mount, every page will give you a small glimpse of the IMPACT of Benedictine life. From children in day care to a 90-year-old oblate, from SBA alumnae to a newly professed sister, from volunteers who plant trees to donors who make a monthly gift, the IMPACT of Benedictine life is far reaching and long lasting.

When you consider a gift to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie this Christmas (or anytime), you are contributing to a postive IMPACT that will have ramifications now and in the future.

There is a return envelope folded in this issue of The Mount. You can also call us to make a donation, 814-899-0614, ask for Sister Linda (Ext. 2409) or Michelle (Ext. 2281). If you prefer to donate online, go to eriebenedictines.org or scan the QR code on the right.

Thank you, and may the peace and joy of Christmas be yours now and always.

Linda Romey, OSB and Michelle Basista, CFRE
128 golfers, Benedictine Sisters, and volunteers gathered on August 15 to raise $81,549. After expenses, $62,000 benefitted the sisters and their important work in the Erie community.

Tournament Winners:
1st place Womens: Bridget Whalen, Carm DeCarlo, Mary Ann King, Kelly Maslar
1st place Mens: Bob Murray, Dave Bauer, Jon Merriott, Shawn Wallace
1st place Mixed: Rick Clayton, Sue Clayton, Leo Olszewski, Rachel Olszewski
2nd place Womens: Mary Hoffman, Mary Ann Hauser, Charlotte Neizmik, Marlene Smith
2nd place Mens: Dave Sinneway Jr., David Sinneway III, Matt Lander, Brian Rigot
2nd place Mixed: Elaine Batkiewicz, Neil Himber, Marty Decrapio, Julio DiMarco

Becoming a monthly donor is a significant way to affirm your commitment to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie and participate in their effort to be a prayerful presence working for good in the city of Erie and beyond.

Monthly donor and oblate Katie Holzheimer, pictured with her sister Mary O’Conner on a recent visit to Erie, told us why she is a monthly donor. “I want to support the Erie Benedictines in their amazing lives and ministries,” she said. “They have taught me so much and I am fortunate to be able to assist them in this way.” Katie is holding her dog, Bella.

It’s easy to become a monthly donor. You can set up a monthly gift online at eriebenedictines.org or you can contact Michelle Basista, Benedictine Sisters Development Associate, at 814-899-0614 ext. 2281. You can set any amount for your gift, and it will be automatically charged to your credit card or directly deducted from your bank account each month.

Benefits to giving monthly: You become part of a community of regular donors, you avoid the hassle of re-entering your details each time you make a new gift, and you’ll know that your generous monthly support of the sisters is helping to carry the Benedictine tradition into the future.

Thank you for deepening your commitment to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.
Rene Filipowski, CIH, ’77:
A leader in global safety

Rene Filipowski wanted to experience life beyond Erie after she graduated from SBA in 1977 and blindly selected (by randomly dropping her finger on a map) Washington, DC, as her destination. She chose The Catholic University of America and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in general biology followed by a Master of Science in cellular biology. Through subsequent chance meetings, encouragements, and promotions Rene eventually became manager of the Designated Agency Safety and Health Official (DASHO) Support Group at Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) headquarters in Washington. After a distinguished career spanning more than 30 years, including 20 years as a Federal employee at the FAA and 10 years as an FAA contractor, Rene retired earlier this year.

“Early on in graduate school, I found that I was gifted at growing cell cultures in vitro, it was second nature to me,” she said. That’s how she began her career as a director of laboratory operations for a small biomedical company in cell biology. She went from there to a career in industrial hygiene, working with asbestos removal in the late 1980s. Eventually she became one of only about 10,000 board certified industrial

St. Benedict Academy, the first school for girls in Erie, educated young women for 120 years until shifting demographics and economic challenges forced the sisters to close the school in 1988. Now, more than 30 years later, the SBA legacy lives on in the 2,666 members of the SBA Alumnae Association and, as you will read in the stories that follow, in individual women whose lives have embodied the legacy of leadership the SBA faculty and staff strove to grow in them, filling their hearts “with higher power and opportunity....”
Linda Laird Staszewski, ’68
Empowering women through women’s stories

Linda Laird Staszewski ’68 is the curator of 20 Lives Ignited: How 20 Women Over 60 are Creating Success on Their Own Terms. It occurred to her that women her age, over 60 (she is 71), have a lot of wisdom to share. She prayed for guidance and felt God telling her, “Why not YOU?” when she began thinking that someone should compile some of this wisdom. So, she set out to collect amazing stories about even more amazing women and their path toward success.

According to Linda, “Our mission is to inspire girls and women, especially women over 60, as it is never too late and you are never too old to become who you want.”

—continued on next page

Left to right, Erie Benedictine Sister Pat Lupo, ’61; book curator/author/aging advocate Linda Laird Staszewski, ’68; publisher Cori Wamsley (Aurora Corialis Publishing, Pittsburgh, PA); and publicist Kelli Komondor, at the launch of 20 Lives Ignited. A large crowd gathered at the Erie Art Museum for the event which featured video testimonials from each of the contributors as well as music, food, and drink.
to be. At our age, we have wisdom and experience from decades of living, learning and loving. I mentor others to live their best lives, all glory to God!”

“My years at SBA started me on a path to personal growth, developing skills, and my God-given talents,” Linda said. “It was there that I first realized how integral women leaders are to the community and to the world. I was particularly inspired by watching women leaders, including the amazing nuns and teachers, as they brought new approaches to leadership, including empathy, collaboration, and team building. This was evidenced by so many of the nuns and teachers at SBA. One example is Sister Joan Chittister, who is such a strong advocate of justice, peace and equality.”

The stories in 20 Lives Ignited showcase wisdom, insight, and love that are applicable to a woman at any age and stage of life. These 20 women have overcome obstacles in spite of the odds against them and are courageously sharing their stories, setting the world on fire.

La hospitalidad benedictina: Benedictine hospitality

Who knew that a phone call in the summer of 1975 would start a cross-cultural relationship that would span decades?

Saint Benedict wrote that monasteries (and by extension schools run by monasteries) are never without guests.

It makes perfect sense, then, that Sister Christine Vladimiroff, who was principal at St. Benedict Academy in the 1970s, would welcome exchange student “guests” to SBA. “Sister Christine called my mother in the summer of 1975 and asked if we’d like to host an exchange student from Mexico,” said Kim (Rinke) Sullivan, ’76. “Of course, my dad thought a single student would be lonely, so he suggested to Sister Christine that she invite two girls as exchange students, and we’d host them both. Pilar and Eva came that August and that was the beginning of our fabulous connection with our adopted family from Mexico.”

For the 1978-79 school year, Ana Elena Santos Lara came to live with Sue and Tom Rinke and their family and attended SBA with Kim’s sister, Halle. Fast forward more than 40 years. “Being an exchange student and living with the Rinke family are two of the best things that have happened to me,” said Ana Elena on a recent visit to Erie. “We have had a very close relationship, more than friendship, that has meant a lot to me and my family. They are my American family. Years after me, my daughter Ana lived with Kim and her family!” Ana has visited Erie 20 times in the last 44 years. “Who knew that in high school a bond would be made for a lifetime!” said Kim.

Sister Christine lived with the Lara Ramos family in Saltillo, Mexico, for summers and one full year while she earned her doctorate at the Universidad Internacional in Mexico City. “My grandparents, Binda and Atanasio, used to say she was their American daughter,” said Ana Elena. Sister Christine died in 2014.

“Benedict’s wisdom in encouraging his followers to welcome guests and strangers was certainly taken to heart by the Rinke family and others who hosted and became friends with our exchange students,” said Sister Phyllis Schleicher, who taught French and was chair of the Language Department at SBA in the mid-70s. “It’s when we get to know the other, the person from another culture, or faith, or economic background that we begin to realize that the differences are far outweighed by our shared humanity. How clearly the long relationship of the Rinkes with their Mexican “daughters” and their families give testimony to this. We need Benedict’s wisdom, and the example of the Rinkes, more than ever in our world today where it seems that fear is too often stronger than welcome.”

After graduation, Kim became a nurse and worked 18 years at Hamot Hospital followed by 21 years as a school nurse, retiring at the
The Class of ’67 recently celebrated their 55-year reunion at their annual picnic. We spent hours having fun, playing games, winning baskets, enjoying good food, reminiscing, and catching up with “friends we never can forget.” We shared life stories and struggles, and gave thanks for the many prayers that helped get us through them. Brenda Swartz Pasko said, “One of the best memories to all of us was the sister’s bread on Thursday. The sharing of bread is truly what it is all about, even when it never made it home. The sharing of life’s struggles was inspiring. We know we are never alone because God is with us and because of our SBA bond, we are all together in prayer for each other.” Next year’s picnic will be held on Wednesday, August 9.

2022 Scholarship Winners

The SBA Alumnae Association is pleased to announce that 25 scholarships of $250 each were awarded to relatives of alumnae who will be attending Catholic grade or high schools for the 2022-23 school year. Funding comes from monies raised at the annual Christmas Party and the Cash Bingos.

Matthew Bond, Cathedral Prep, grandson of Patricia Devine ’65; Mila Bender, St Jude School, great niece of Lisa Kelleher ’82; Jenna Rose Meyer, Mercyhurst Prep, granddaughter of Nancy Veshecco ’66; Hannah Steppic, Cathedral Prep, daughter of Adrienne Steppic ’84; Nicholas Wasielewski, North Catholic High School, grandson of Susan Wasielewski ’58; Teddy, Penny, Maggie Groucutt, Immaculate Conception Academy, grandchildren of Mary Rita Groucutt ’72; Dylan Lubowicki, St Jude School, grandson of Kathleen Weed ’75; Juliet Dombrowski, Our Lady of Victory Catholic High School, granddaughter of Karen Krahe ’66; Madison McElhaney, Cathedral Prep, niece of Mary Drabino ’74; Dane Stemmier, Blessed Francis Seelos Academy, grandson of Catherine Stemmier ’64; Morgan Sigler, Mercyhurst Prep, granddaughter of Eleanor Sigler ’61; Noah, Casey Wagner, Cathedral Prep, St James School, grandsons of Nancy Ruffa ’73; Carolyn McGraw, St Joseph School, great niece of Lucrecia Rogers ’63; Charles Campbell, St Luke School, nephew of Kathleen Burik ’77; Henry Tellers, St Matthew Catholic School, great nephew of Christine Visosky ’59; Josephine Kuzma, Mercyhurst Prep, cousin of Maureen Hubert ’73; Natalie Ann Weigold, Our Lady of Peace School, granddaughter of Michele Pellegrino ’81; Dylan Danch, Cathedral Prep, grandson of Kathy Danch ’73; Morgan Gladitz, Cathedral Prep, granddaughter of Linda Gladitz ’66; Krista Denslinger, Mother of Sorrows, granddaughter of Kathleen Denslinger ’69; Sadie Elizabeth Messer, Mercyhurst Prep, granddaughter of Barbara Berdis ’61; Andrew Barczynski, Incarnate Word Academy, grandson of Jeannette Barczynski ’65; Grace Murphy, St Luke School, great niece of Angela Orlando ’76; Emilee Kimmy, Mercyhurst Prep, daughter of Christine Kimmy ’87; Livi Freiwald, Oakland Catholic High School, granddaughter of Judy Freiwald ’64
Please alert Ann Comstock, Benedictine Sisters Development Office, of any address changes. Call her at 814-899-0614, ext. 2573, or email communications@eriebenedictines.org. If you prefer not to receive a print copy of The Mount, Ann can also remove your name from the list. Current and past issues of The Mount are available on our website at eriebenedictines.org/mount-back-issues.