This morning as the sisters gathered for morning praise I was overcome by the rays of light streaming from the light fixtures hanging above the choir stalls. Not only was this light permeating the dark Chapel but its rays were also penetrating through the stained-glass windows into the darkness outside. Being moved by the awareness of the sisters’ prayers on behalf of all of creation as rays of the Light of Christ that permeate the darkness of the world, I left the Chapel to stand outside in the darkness to experience those rays of light streaming through the chapel windows. Standing in the darkness I was overcome by a deep feeling of oneness with the world knowing that when the sisters gather for prayer our prayers are offered as Christ’s Light to penetrate the darkness serving as a guiding light for others. Our prayers for peace, healing, comfort, and justice for the oppressed are offered as rays of hope that penetrate the darkness of our times. When the sisters gather in our Chapel for prayer, we do so in the presence of Christ, the Light of all compassion and healing that ties our fragmented world together, that Light of Christ which is the core of our Sacred Heart.

Our early morning prayer together in the Chapel stirs us to move beyond the Chapel. We each head toward our ministries and work of the day, departing the light-filled Chapel like running streams that course from the light into the darkened world. Likewise, the words of St. Benedict – Run while you have the light of life – urge us to keep moving, to keep growing, to keep progressing in our monastic life and in faith. In this edition of Benedictine Update you will read of some of the ways we are currently moving forward, progressing, growing...running in the light of life. We are grateful for all who run with us, shining like rays that permeate the darkness of the world.
Sr. Tonette Sperando, O.S.B., Prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Cullman, celebrated her 25th Jubilee on Saturday, November 18, at Sacred Heart Monastery in Cullman. The heart of the celebration was a Jubilee Mass held in the monastery chapel during which Sr. Tonette renewed the promises of her Monastic Profession, reaffirming the commitment that she made a quarter-century ago. During these twenty-five years, Sr. Tonette has ministered with joy, generosity, creativity, and untiring enthusiasm, anchored in prayer and in monastic community.

A native of Birmingham, Sr. Tonette was baptized at the Cathedral of St. Paul where her parents are still parishioners. She was taught by the Benedictine Sisters at both the elementary and high school levels. After graduating from John Carroll Catholic High School in Birmingham, Sr. Tonette attended the University of South Alabama where she earned a B.S. in Elementary Education. She later earned a M.A. in Educational Administration from the University of Dayton.

During her early years in the monastic community, Sr. Tonette served as a teacher. She later transitioned into administration, serving as Principal at Sacred Heart School in Cullman, as Curriculum Coordinator at St. Benedict Catholic School in Elberta, and as Principal (K-6) and President (3K-12) of Holy Spirit Catholic Regional School in Tuscaloosa.

In 2005, Sr. Tonette was appointed Treasurer of the monastic community as well as Development Director. When the community made the decision to pursue a major renovation of the monastery and Retreat Center, Sr. Tonette was given the additional responsibility of serving as Director of the Reflect Renew Rejoice Capital Campaign, which she guided to a successful conclusion.

In 2015, Sr. Tonette was elected Prioress of the monastic community, a role in which she serves with her characteristic dedication, enthusiasm, and joy. Under her leadership for the past two and a half years, the sisters have extended their previous renovation efforts to include the development and implementation of a Landscape Master Plan for the monastery grounds (see article on page 5), have embarked on a Future Planning project and, most importantly, continued their daily fidelity to monastic life. A key aspect of monastic leadership is love for the sisters, and this care is readily evident in Sr. Tonette’s leadership of the community in the day-to-day living of monastic life.

Love for God and the people of God, along with a fervent desire to bring glory to God, have been Sr. Tonette’s guiding motivations in her twenty-five years as a professed monastic and in all her ministerial endeavors. Reflecting on her quarter-century of monastic life, Sr. Tonette stated, “I am humbled by God’s unconditional love and the many blessings received over these past twenty-five years of a professed monastic life. Loving family and friends have nurtured and encouraged me along life’s journey. My Benedictine sisters continue to be an inspiration to me as they give witness to living a joyful life grounded in our prayerful expression of love for God and for others. It is with much gratitude to God and to those whose prayer, love and support have encouraged me throughout the years that I celebrate this momentous occasion.”

The monastic community was blessed to have many of Sr. Tonette’s family members and friends present for the Jubilee celebration, including her parents, Steve and Catherine Sperando; her brother, Michael S. Sperando; and sisters, Gina S. Lackey (C.D.) and Sarah S. Burns (Roland), along with their families.

Rev. Joel Martin, O.S.B., of Saint Bernard Abbey served as Principal Celebrant for the Jubilee Mass. Sister Treva Heinberg, Subprioress, received Sister Tonette’s renewal of her Monastic Profession, and Sister Janet Marie Fleming offered a Reflection at the conclusion of Mass. Following the Eucharistic Celebration, a festive luncheon allowed Sisters and guests to visit and share in the joy of the occasion.

Manor Residents’ Generosity Shines Through

Residents of Benedictine Manor have been very generous in responding to needs both in the local area and in the storm-battered Caribbean. Locally, Manor residents gave donations to First Source for Women, a pregnancy care center located in nearby Hanceville. The donations were in support of the purchase of a mobile unit that will house a travelling sonar (ultrasound) machine for expectant mothers. In late October, First Source brought the bus by for the residents to view. Also, after Hurricane Irma ravaged the U.S. Virgin Islands, residents gathered donations for a clinic that was in need of supplies. Three full boxes of supplies were packed and shipped to the Virgin Islands. Additional funds were collected to offset the cost of postage.

Jean Bybee, Sybil White and Joanna Vaughn pack supplies to be sent to the storm ravaged Caribbean.
This October, Catholics and Protestants alike have marked the 500th Anniversary of the event that is widely considered to be the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. The Benedictine Sisters Retreat Center marked the occasion by hosting a day-long ecumenical program focused on the event. While not celebrating division, we did want to acknowledge and give thanks to God for the gifts that have flowed through the various expressions of our Christian faith over these five centuries.

Fr. Richard Donohoe of the Diocese of Birmingham opened the program with an introductory presentation on the theological and historical background of the Reformation. Following his introduction, representatives of 7 different denominations presented on the background and founding of their denomination and the particular gifts they have brought to the Christian community as a whole. A time for questions and conversation followed a shared lunch, and the day concluded with a Taizé prayer service.

In other Retreat Center news, several updates are being made to Benet Hall. Among them are a new HVAC unit to replace one that was installed in the 1980’s, new paint trim on the windows and porch, ceiling repairs, and fresh paint on the ceiling of the front porch. Many of the improvements of the landscaping project (see page 5) will directly benefit the Retreat Center, especially signage and the planting of trees. There are now numerous new trees in the guest house areas, and the grassy island in the parking lot. They look beautiful, and we invite you to come and see!

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We continue to be blessed with excellent presenters. This summer, Cackie Upchurch (pictured right), Director of the Little Rock Scripture Study, presented a Day of Reflection which was co-sponsored by the Diocese of Birmingham. This coming spring, we will welcome back scripture scholar Bonnie Thurston who will present on the Gospel of Mark.

Fr. Donohoe (with microphone) presents as part of the panel discussion for the Reformation Program.

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A Note from Development

Sr. Karen Ann Lortscher, O.S.B.

The light of Christ shining in you and in your generosity lights the way in the darkness ahead for us. Your kindness and commitment to us and to the Benedictine charism of monastic prayer, community, and ministry keeps us steadfast on the path. “Run while you have the light of life,” Benedict says. Your assistance keeps us going over the long haul – a marathon rather than a sprint. Thank you is not enough to say, but it is a start.

We have reached a new milestone! We are now able to take your donations online at our web site. We hope this will be simple and easy for those who wish to make contributions in this manner. We welcome your feedback and suggestions, as this is a new venture for us. We hope there will not be too many kinks to work out. Visit our web site at www.shmon.org to check it out.

We stumbled! The donation envelope that went out with this year’s Annual Appeal neglected to direct you to make out your check to our Foundation to, “Sacred Heart Monastery Foundation.” To make a contribution to any other appeal or fund, make out your check to, “Benedictine Sisters.” If we already tripped you up, we apologize. Do not worry, however, about any past donations to the Foundation. We made the necessary adjustments.

Once again, thank you for running this race with us and for lighting our way with the light of Christ in you. If you have suggestions, concerns, or if you would like to donate, please do not hesitate to call 256-615-6071, write a note, or e-mail development@shmon.org.

Please help us conserve costs and stay in touch by notifying the Development Office of any name or address changes.

Mission Statement

We, the Benedictine Sisters of Cullman, Alabama at Sacred Heart Monastery, inspired by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Rule of St. Benedict, commit ourselves to witness Christ’s love to all peoples through a vowed life of monastic prayer, community, and ministry.
The Federation of St. Scholastica Pre-Chapter was held at St. Leo University at St. Leo, FL, this past summer. The gathering was comprised of Prioresses and Delegates from all the member monasteries of the Federation.

Representing Sacred Heart Monastery were Sr. Tonette Sperando, Prioress, and Sisters Karen Ann Lortscher and Elisabeth Meadows, Delegates. Sr. Lynn Marie chaired the meeting in her role as Federation President. Sr. Therese assisted with many technical aspects of the meeting.

With the goal of setting the agenda for next year’s quadrennial Chapter, the delegates worked with the Pre-Chapter theme of Facing Forward with Hope. The main presenter was Sr. Edith Bogue, O.S.B, of Saint Scholastica Monastery in Duluth, MN. Sr. Edith, a Sociology professor at St. Scholastica College in Duluth, offered Pre-Chapter attendees tools from both modern sociology and ancient tradition to see and respond to the challenges of religious life today. She especially emphasized the importance of the Benedictine charism as a guide to the path ahead. Those who attended from Sacred Heart felt that Sr. Edith’s presentations, and the discussions that followed, were right in line with our own future planning.

These themes will be continued at next year’s Chapter meeting, which will be held in Cullman.

The Monastic Community and the Retreat Center were privileged to host the annual Benedictine Subprioress and House Coordinator Gathering this past September. Within a monastic community, both of these roles simultaneously involve both heavy responsibility and gentle care as the Subprioress and House Coordinator assist the Prioress in leading and caring for the community. A time away with others who hold similar roles offers a welcome respite by which to refresh and renew, and to learn from and listen to others.

Sr. Tonette Sperando co-led the conference portion of the gathering along with Sr. Kimberly Porter of St. Walburg Monastery in Covington, KY. Sr. Tonette spoke on leadership while Sr. Kimberly, a professional counselor, led sessions focused on caring for self and others in the context of monastic community. In addition to formal conference sessions, ample time was provided for rest and relaxation away from the demands of day-to-day leadership.

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When you meet to discuss your plans with your legal advisor you will need the following legal name for the Sisters:
Benedictine Sisters of Cullman, Alabama or
Sacred Heart Monastery of Cullman, Alabama Foundation

Thank you for considering this important and tax effective form of supporting the Benedictine Sisters!

May God bless you richly for your generosity to our Community.

Sr. Karen Ann Lortscher, OSB
Development Office
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Cullman, AL 35055
(256) 615-6071
e-mail: development@shmon.org

Subprioresses and House Coordinators gather outside Sacred Heart Chapel.
The monastery is a bit larger than a cottage, but the word 'industry' is exactly right to describe the industrious spirit of Sr. Jane Bishop who has launched the monastic community into a new venture. A few years ago, Sr. Jane began taking advantage of the bounty provided each fall from the many pecan trees around the monastery, spending countless hours gathering pecans from across the grounds. Sr. Jane eventually began to notice pecan crops around Cullman that did not appear to be harvested. She obtained permission from one landowner, and then another, and then another, and soon was collecting pecans from several sites around town.

Sr. Emilie began helping Sr. Jane prepare the pecans for use in baked goods that eventually found their way to the monastery table. Then Sr. Regina joined in the efforts, as did Sisters Eleanor, Treva, and Therese. Now, under Sr. Jane’s coordination, this initial venture of a single Sister has become a community adventure. This past year, Sister Jane set her sights higher and began to consider the possibility of expanding her pecan project into a bona fide cottage industry. She took the State of Alabama’s Cottage Industry course and is now certified to sell roasted pecans. An additional permit allows her to sell unroasted, shelled pecans. This summer, Sr. Jane made her first sales to the public. The venture was so successful that she sold out of her entire supply within a couple of days. But the pecans are again ready for harvesting and the second season of Heavenly Oven-Roasted Pecans tree-to-table cottage industry is underway. Congratulations to Sr. Jane and the numerous Sisters who assist on this successful venture!

The landscaping project has moved from the planning stage to implementation this fall with the planting of trees, installation of new light posts along the front drive, and finalization of the design of signage that will soon be installed on the monastery and Retreat Center grounds.

First up among the activities this fall, trenches were dug along the front entrance and exit drives of the monastery to accommodate underground electrical conduits for the new lamp posts. The new posts will be smaller and less intrusive than the former city-owned posts, yet they still provide appropriate safety lighting for the area. The new lampposts will also match the posts installed in the Retreat Center area in 2014 during the construction of the new guest houses, thus creating a unified appearance across the grounds.

As trench work in the front neared completion, our maintenance staff dug in with shovels toward the back of the grounds. A row of juniper trees was planted behind Ottilia Hall to screen a row of HVAC units and add some much needed visual interest to this functional area. For the Retreat Center, five trees along with some shrubs were planted in the grassy island area of the parking lot, a row of red maples were planted along the entrance drive, and ten trees were planted around the guest houses. At present they are all small saplings, but already they are adding beauty to the grounds.

As these two projects have gotten into the ground, the final touches have been put on the signage design. This should be installed early in 2018. We are grateful to the support of many who have helped make this portion of the overall project possible! We still have several landscaping phases left – improvements to the cemetery and surrounding areas, a path from the guest houses to the cemetery, improved walking routes around the grounds, and more. We welcome financial contributions to help bring these next phases to completion!

Of the 36 new trees planted, 17 of them had been nurtured from the seedling stage by Sr. Regina, depicted here with a Japanese Maple she is still nurturing. Sr. Regina maintains an active ‘tree nursery’ in a shed behind the monastery, working especially with Gingko trees that she harvests from the monastery’s front lawn. She offers these for sale to retreat and other guests.

The monastery is a bit larger than a cottage, but the word ‘industry’ is exactly right to describe the industrious spirit of Sr. Jane Bishop who has launched the monastic community into a new venture. A few years ago, Sr. Jane began taking advantage of the bounty provided each fall from the many pecan trees around the monastery, spending countless hours gathering pecans from across the grounds. Sr. Jane eventually began to notice pecan crops around Cullman that did not appear to be harvested. She obtained permission from one landowner, and then another, and then another, and soon was collecting pecans from several sites around town.

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News Briefs

Sr. Tonette Sperando and Sr. Lynn Marie McKenzie attended the annual meeting of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in Orlando this past August. The theme of the gathering was Being the Presence of Love: The Power of Transformation. In reflecting on the presentations from the various speakers, Sr. Tonette noted her deepening realization that “We are called to a deeper communion so that our individual heartbeats become synchronized with the heartbeat of the Risen Christ, and we are called to be the heartbeat of the Risen Christ for others.”

Left to right, Sisters Sherrie and Lynn Marie at the RCRI conference.

Sr. Sherrie Brainard and Sr. Lynn Marie McKenzie attended the Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI) meeting in St. Louis this fall. The annual conference provides attendees with up-to-date information on many of the financial, legal, and administrative issues that impact religious life today. The St. Louis meeting was Sr. Lynn Marie’s last as President of RCRI as her three-year term came to a close. She was recognized for her years of service as President and for the previous years that she served on the RCRI Board of Directors.

Sr. Mary McGehee has had several opportunities to work with breast cancer survivors and current patients over the past several months. In October, she led a morning of relaxation and meditation for several breast cancer survivor support groups. Sr. Mary has also seen many breast cancer patients individually for Spiritual Direction in recent months. This past summer, Sr. Mary took a short sabbatical from her busy ministry, spending almost two months in silence at Cedars of Peace in Kentucky.

Sisters Sara Aiden Burress and Michelle Renee St. Marie attended a prayer vigil sponsored by the Birmingham chapter of Pax Christi on the anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In coming together for prayer, the group read from Romans 12 and prayed for those who died and for an end to nuclear weaponry. Both Sisters have become active members of the chapter, doing their part to spread the message of peace and urge an end to violence.

In July, Sisters Mary, Magdalena, and Minona Anne both participated in T4 formation groups. Sr. Magdalena, Novice Director, serves on the Content Committee for the program and has served as a group facilitator. Sr. Mary serves as Scholastic Director for the community.

Sr. Michelle Renee St. Marie spent three weeks at Annunciation Monastery in Bismarck, ND, this past summer participating in the Benedictine Spirituality Workshop and Retreat (BSWR). BSWR is held each summer for Sisters in Initial Formation who are preparing for perpetual monastic profession. Sisters from eight different monasteries across the U.S. attended the program. Sr. Michelle found the experience to be fruitful, reflecting that “this workshop and retreat has given me the gift of time to reflect on what a blessing it is to be a part of our monastic community and an appreciation for the interconnections with other Benedictine communities.

Sr. Therese Haydel attended the biennial meeting of the Monastic Worship Forum, held at Subiaco Abbey in Arkansas this past summer. The theme was Celebrating the Liturgical Year. Fr. Michael Joncas was the featured presenter; he also shared with attendees some of his newer hymns and Psalm settings.

Also traveling to Subiaco Abbey this summer was Sr. Elisabeth Meadows who attended the biennial conference of the Association of Benedictine Retreat Centers. Sr. Elisabeth was part of the Leadership Team that planned the meeting.

Several Sisters traveled to Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, IN, this summer for a rare opportunity to hear Australian monastic scholar and author Michael Casey, OCSO, lead a workshop on monastic life. Making the journey were Sisters Tonette Sperando, Priscilla Cohen, Marian Davis, Karen Ann Lortscher, Elisabeth Meadows, and Sara Aiden Burress. The workshop, entitled Monasticism in the 21st Century: A View from the Trenches, offered the Sisters valuable insights and perspectives on monastic life in the current era from a monk noted not only for his scholarship but also for his lived monastic experience and his wisdom. Fr. Michael encouraged the Sisters to look to the early sources of our monastic tradition even as we consider our vision of monastic life today, and offered perspectives on many elements of contemporary life as they impact the monastic vocation.

Sr. Lynn Marie McKenzie traveled to South Korea.

Sr. Lynn Marie McKenzie continues to travel frequently to monasteries around the U.S. in her role as President of the Federation of St. Scholastica. This fall, however, her travels took her halfway around the world to the country of South Korea where she was one of three U.S. delegates to the Communio Internationalis Benedictarum, an international body representing Benedictine women from around the world. Sr. Lynn Marie found the time in South Korea to be a unique experience of a lifetime. She reports, “To be in the country for the first time, to meet the Korean Benedictine Sisters, and to experience the Korean culture were magnificent opportunities which have broadened my outlook on life. I am most grateful for this wonderful experience and know that I will be assimilating it for years to come.”

Left to right, Sisters Michelle Renee, Magdalena, Mary, and Minona Anne

Michelle Renee, and Minona Anne attended the Wisdom Connections - T4 Symposium at St. Leo University in St. Leo, FL. The Symposium gathered Sisters in Initial Formation and their formators from around the country. T4, an abbreviation for Timeless Tradition – Technological Times, is a program that utilizes technology to enhance the formation of new Sisters and to provide an opportunity for regular connections between Sisters in different monasteries.

Sr. Lynn Marie (l) in Seoul, Korea, with a Korean Benedictine Sister

Sr. Lynn Marie (r) in Seoul, Korea

Sr. Lynn Marie travels to South Korea

Right to left, Sisters Michelle Renee, Magdalena, Mary, and Minona Anne
The Oblates of Sacred Heart Monastery gathered at the Benedictine Sisters Retreat Center October 13-15, 2017 for their annual retreat. Sr. Betty Drewes, OSB, of Monastery Immaculate Conception, Ferdinand, Indiana, was the presenter for this year’s retreat. The theme was “The Path of Grace.” Sr. Betty invited the Oblates to reflect on the moments of grace in their life’s journey as Benedictine Oblates. The presentation offered essential Benedictine values for living the Oblate way of life. St. Benedict’s Rule invites followers to truly listen to the Scriptures, to God’s word spoken in one’s heart, and to God’s word spoken in others. Sr. Betty presented the following mantra to take as a gift at the end of the retreat: “Around every turn on the Benedictine path, God is manifested in a new way!”

Sr. Priscilla Cohen, Oblate Director, shared with the Oblates that the wisdom received from Sr. Betty should renew their hearts to new listening, new wisdom, and a deeper living into the rich Benedictine heritage to which they have been called as Oblates. Oblates are called to live the Benedictine way of life in the world as their state in life permits, and to be witnesses of Christ by word and example to all. By their spiritual affiliation with Sacred Heart Monastery, they promise to share in the prayer and good works of the community that “in all things God may be glorified.”

Under the direction of Sr. Tonette Sperando, Prioress, and Sr. Priscilla Cohen, Oblate Director, twenty four Oblates renewed their Oblation. Janet Youell (Birmingham) was enrolled as an Oblate Candidate, and Cindy Roff (Tuscaloosa) made her Final Oblation.

We mourn the loss of those close to us, and join with family and friends as we remember in grateful prayer:
Matthew Liang, brother of our Sr. Margaret Mary Liang; Lanell Barrett, sister-in-law of Sr. Regina Barrett; Peggy McLean, sister-in-law of Sr. Mary Adrian McLean, as well as Ferd Hernandez, Sr. Mary Adrian’s niece’s husband; Victor Rumore, brother of Deacon Terry Rumore, Sr. Janet Marie Flemming’s brother-in-law; and Louis Caruso, cousin to Sr. Tonette Sperando. Among our Benedictine Oblates we remember Elisabeth “Libby” Drew (J. Rodney) Blanton, (’64); and Phyllis Lavelle, mother of Marialyce Lavelle.
Alumnae/i or their family members who recently went to God include Evelyn Bernice Boswell (’47); Ann Moyer Heck, (’50); Florene Legg, (’52), sister of Reba Legg Shakelford, (’32); Frederica Anderson (formerly Sister Andrea), (’60); Maria Soto Zaldua, (’61); Ella Mae Hale, (’69); and Gerry Kreps, husband of Concetta Lovoy Kreps, (’74).
We only recently learned of two deaths that occurred some time ago: community friend Rosalyn Orth Purcell and Lt. Col. Robert Dannacher, USAF, husband of Margaret “Maggie” Hudson (’51).

We offer our condolences to the monks of St. Bernard Abbey for the passing of Brother Augustine Campion, O.S.B., a friend to so many. We also gratefully remember Rev. Richard Altenbaugh of the Pensacola diocese; Bea Campbell; Steve Griffith; Edmund Tenbarge; Jo Ann Lauffenberger, and Sarah Jo Schaffer. Requiescant in Pace.
The sisters have begun a new cottage industry ~ Heavenly Pecans ~

Your generous response to this new endeavor has helped the industry to grow in just a short amount of time.

Would you like to be a part of the excitement?

Here is how you could assist:

- Allow the sisters or volunteers to gather pecans from your property
- Suggest names of neighbors who may be willing to allow the sisters or volunteers to gather pecans from their property
- Volunteer to gather pecans from the sisters’ grounds and/or other approved locations
- Volunteer to help the sisters shell pecans

If interested, please call the monastery switchboard at 256-734-4622 to leave your name and number. Sister Jane will return your call.