Benedictine Update

Sacred Heart Monastery

From the Prioress

Sr. Tonette Sperando, O.S.B.

As Prioress, I have the unique gift and responsibility of accompanying each Sister as she lives out her monastic commitment within our community. In temperament, personality, and giftedness, each Sister is unique, and Benedict calls the monastic leader to be respectful of these differences. While moderation is one of his key instructions when it comes to leading the community, it is also a vital element in the care of souls which is how Benedict describes the task of the monastic leader. Whether it is adapting to the character of each Sister or being "discerning and moderate" (RB 64) in their assignments, moderation is an important expression of the discretion required for monastic leaders.

Among the ways that Benedict describes this moderation is his instruction to "arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from" (RB 64:19). As Prioress, Benedict encourages me to listen with the ear of my heart to the needs of each Sister in order that I may know when to support and when to challenge. It is about a genuine love for each Sister as an individual and the desire to call her to spiritual growth without, as Benedict quotes Isaiah, 'crushing the bruised reed,' yet also challenging her to growth. The relationship between a Prioress and each Sister is a sacred relationship built upon the love of Christ. It is love that leads to moderation, and moderation that fosters love. It is this love that enables the Prioress and Sisters to journey together on paths of peace.

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"All things are to be done with moderation."

Rule of St. Benedict 48:9

St. Benedict counsels the monastic leader to arrange and assign work in a manner that takes individual capabilities and needs into account. This is but one example of the value St. Benedict places on moderation. It is a theme and pastoral approach that can be seen throughout Benedict's Rule whether referring to the amount of food and drink, the goods of the monastery, or the care of community members.

In this issue, we will explore moderation from the perspective of several of our Sisters. One theme that comes through in their observations is the way in which the discernment needed for a life of moderation – not too much, not too little – ultimately fosters a self-awareness that leads to compassion.

We congratulate

Abbot Marcus Voss, OSB

on his election as the

Tenth Abbot

of St. Bernard Abbey

Nearly the entire community was able to attend the Abbatial Blessing of Abbot Marcus. Sister Tonette was invited to serve as a lector.

What a wonderful time we had with our brothers from "across the creek" when the monks of St. Bernard Abbey joined us for supper one evening in August. It was a lovely evening of visiting and sharing.

A Note from Development

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

Your support sustains us. Whether it is the generous support of your prayers, your kind speech in spreading the word about us, or in your direct financial support of the Sisters and our ministries, we are most grateful to you! As you will read within this issue, our Benedictine values call us to a mode of living characterized by balance, moderation, and discretion – all rooted in love. Your donations are received and stewarded with attention to these values.

Amazon Smile: At the time of this writing, holiday shopping is just around the corner. We are pleased to announce that the Benedictine Sisters of Cullman, Alabama is a charity recognized by AmazonSmile. What is AmazonSmile? AmazonSmile is a simple and automatic way for you to support your favorite charitable organization every time you shop, at no cost to you. When you shop at smile.amazon.com, you'll find the exact same prices, selection and convenient shopping as at Amazon.com, with the added bonus that Amazon will donate a portion of the purchase price to the Benedictine Sisters of Cullman, Alabama if you choose us as your favorite charitable organization.

Sustaining Donors: We value all of your contributions, but your monthly, bi-monthly, and quarterly contributions to our Annual Appeal sustain us in our prayer and work. Your regular gifts help to keep our operations (in support of our ministries) going. Some do this by requesting that we deduct a set amount from their credit card until they ask us to stop. Others have made arrangements with their bank to send a regular check from their account. We have been advised that sustaining gifts are the backbone of a successful development program, so I would like to invite you to consider making your contributions in a sustaining manner. You may even find it more convenient!

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Sisters mourn the loss of Sr. Mary Grace Mecke

Sr. Mary Grace Mecke, O.S.B., died peacefully in the monastery infirmary on October 21, 2019, at the age of 93. Born in 1926 in Florence, AL, Sr. Mary Grace was baptized Gertrude Marie Mecke at St. Michael Catholic Church in St. Florian, AL. She was raised within a devout Catholic family in a rural close-knit community with a strong German heritage. Sr. Mary Grace described her family as "very happy, very close, and having much fun together." Her early years of education were in St. Florian where she formed fond memories of being taught by Benedictine Sisters. After completing high school, Sr. Mary Grace attended a business college and began several years of employment at a bank in Florence.

During choir practice one evening, a Sister pulled her aside and asked Sr. Mary Grace whether she might have a vocation. After praying a Rosary Novena, Sr. Mary Grace decided to enter the Benedictine Sisters of Cullman, later calling it "the best decision I ever made in my life." She entered the community as a postulant in 1947, made her temporary monastic profession in 1949, and her perpetual monastic profession in 1952.

After her entry, Sr. Mary Grace completed academic work in preparation for teaching. She later earned an M.B.A. from the University of Notre Dame and an M.A. in English from Catholic University of America.

Sr. Mary Grace was an admired and effective teacher in Catholic schools within the Diocese of Birmingham and the Archdiocese of Mobile. Following many years in the ministry of education, Sr. Mary Grace spent several years serving in roles that utilized her administrative skills.

Sr. Mary Grace was rarely found without a book in her hand. She was especially fond of historical and biographical works, one of which could usually be found right alongside her spiritual reading. Looking back on her years as a Sister, Sr. Mary Grace once said about her vocation, "I am so convinced and certain that I am where the Lord wants me to be. The blessings of peace and love that are mine are inexpressible."

Sr. Mary Grace Mecke

Celebrating with our "grandmother house"

One of our two 'grandmother houses' – St. Benedict's Monastery in Bakerstown, PA (a suburb of Pittsburgh) – is celebrating its 150th birthday this year. As part of the celebration, Sr. Tonette was invited to participate in a special evening of celebrating their ministerial heritage, including the founding of their daughter-houses and grand-daughter houses.

One of St. Benedict Monastery's daughter-houses is Holy Name Monastery in Florida. When our community was formed in 1902, eight of the sixteen foundresses of the new foundation were from Holy Name. Sr. Tonette recounted this history for the Pittsburgh community and their guests, sharing with them a quote from our published community history: "The story of how these groups came together through a series of apparent setbacks illuminates the profound truth that destiny waits in the hand of God more than in the designs of human beings." (From Sister Mary Ruth Coffman's *On Good Ground*, 1993.)

In her remarks, Sr. Tonette drew a connection between Pittsburgh and Birmingham, with the latter as the "Pittsburgh of the South," and used steel as a metaphor to describe the "tensile strength" present in both communities.

Sr. Tonette (r) with the Sr. Karen Brink, Prioress of St. Benedict's Monastery in Bakerstown, PA, and Sr. Roberta Bailey, Prioress at Holy Name Monastery in St. Leo, FL, our grandmother- and mother-houses respectively. Sr. Sherrie Brainard (not pictured) also represented our community at the celebration.

From the Prioress

(Continued from page 1)

In addition to guiding my discernment with individual Sisters, the entire life of a Benedictine monastery is to be governed by a sense of moderation. Whether it is the times for meals, the quantity of food and drink, the frequency of speech, the times of prayer, or the amount of work…Benedict counsels a balanced moderation for all of this. Although it is the role of the Prioress to foster peace and harmony within the monastery, each Sister plays an important part in making this a daily reality. As each Sister seeks to find her personal balance of prayer, work, and leisure, she knows that others are doing the same. It is by gently supporting one another on this quest for moderation in all things that communal peace and harmony resound throughout the monastery. Perhaps this healthy, measured approach – so practical, realistically human, and rooted in love – is why Benedict's Rule has stood the test of centuries. We are blessed here at Sacred Heart to be instilled with this deep understanding of how seeking a moderate life leads to a greater fulfillment in life and love. I invite you to consider how you might consciously incorporate a sense of moderation into your life, a moderation rooted in an expansive love for Christ and for others.

Sr. Benita Peters

Sr. Benita Peters –

On Moderation

Living with moderation is a wholesome way to live, observes Sr. Benita, noting that "It's all connected – spiritual, mental, emotional, physical – and everything I do is connected to others. The decisions I make about how to live affect my relationship with God, with myself, and the Sisters with whom I live."

From her own experience as a monastic, Sr. Benita makes two particularly important observations. One, she says that "The monastic value of moderation leads me to be careful with both people and things, including following Benedict's instruction to treat the goods of the monastery as the sacred vessels of the altar. A second observation is that the discipline of living with moderation helps one look at oneself with honesty – "because you have to make a choice to speak or not to speak, and this helps you relate to others with more integrity," she relates. Sr. Benita says that having to ponder a choice makes you more aware of your own thoughts, feelings, and abilities, and less likely to criticize others. "It boils down to humility," she says, adding that "I am less likely to criticize others when I know I have the problem myself and I realize that others are just as human as I am. Moderation has a lot to do with being able to see rightly."

More On Moderation

Sr. Mary, who studied in Rome with Benedictine scholar Sr. Aquinata Bockmann, relates that the Rule of Benedict, compared to earlier monastic rules, is much more moderate. Although St. Benedict often copied sentences or even paragraphs from his predecessors, he edited them in ways that reflect how attentive he was to the Gospel and the Gospel ways of love. This is evidence of his long practice of lectio divina with the scriptures and the internalization of the holy Gospel.

Sr. Mary McGehee –

On Moderation

Sr. Mary sees Benedict's use of the word *"discretio,"* or discretion, as a key to understanding what a life of moderation might be. We need discretion to live the simple realities of being human with its importance of relating with each other in kindly ways. "Living together – whether in the monastery or in any type of community – we need to be aware of our own needs and those of others," she relates. She points out that needs may be different for different people.

Sr. Mary McGehee

"Moderation implies the idea of 'measure,' or forgoing excess. It helps us be attuned to, or 'measure', our genuine human needs, and then see what is beyond those needs as excess." Moderation is a striving toward greater simplicity. Sr. Mary feels this is a particular need for people today. "We fly ourselves all over the place with distractions. It takes an inner sense of discretion to discern what we need in order to find balance in our lives." Sr. Mary believes that moderation is especially needed when we speak. "Discretion is needed with words," she says.

Sr. Treva Heinberg –

On Moderation

Sr. Treva sees moderation as vital for community relationships, stating that, "When people live together it takes a deep spirituality to accept not only one's self but also others in their humanness. Moderation accommodates and makes allowances for our weaknesses as well as our strengths. It helps us accomplish a mutual flexibility that allows us to accept other people, and love them.

Sr. Treva also connects moderation with mindfulness and presence, in particular because of the moderating influence that being mindful can have on one's actions. "Benedict stresses the motivation of the monastic, the reason why they came to the monastery. It must be to seek God. One must have an interior sense of why one is doing something in order to be mindful, and then work from this core. This allows one to see a broader perspective but also avoid extremes," Sr. Treva says. She goes on to say, "Monastic community life tends toward the center," she says, "and Christ is the center."

Sr. Treva

More On Moderation

Sr. Treva connects the Benedictine value of moderation with both the 'golden mean' of early philosophy and the Scholastic philosophy of the medieval era. She says, "Moderation isn't just a Benedictine value, it's a human value. The Scholastic philosophers had it right: *In medio stat virtus* (Virtue stands in the middle)."

Sr. Margaret Mary Liang –

On Moderation

We are not meant to live at extremes," says Sr. Margaret Mary. "Benedict's middle path of moderation was wise. It is a path that is reachable, but we still encounter our limitations and weakness as we walk and grow. Because of this we develop humility, and in encountering our own limitations we become more accepting of others' weakness."

Sr. Margaret Mary Liang

Sr. Margaret Mary makes the good observation that even though the Prioress and the community itself help keep a community on a moderate path, "people also moderate themselves." It is a spiritual discipline to keep on the middle path and avoid unhealthy extremes. "The discipline of moderation is an aid to individual growth while also an aid to community life," she concludes.

Sr. Bernadette Sachs –

On Moderation

Sr. Bernadette serves as Director of Food Service for the community and is on the front lines of moderation when it comes to our food and drink. Although her work involves practical decisions, the decisions come from deep spiritual roots for Sr. Bernadette. She says, "Moderation teaches us to look at what we're doing and not run ahead and try to do more but to do what's necessary." The deeper meaning of what we are doing is important, Sr. Bernadette relates, saying that "It's not just about bodily food. We're feeding each other spiritually, including in the way we go about our work."

When asked how she keeps herself on track in the monastic value of moderation, Sr. Bernadette says, "There is a point at which moderation is simply a way of life, not a conscious effort. However, like anyone, I can sometimes get on a roller coaster and forget what I'm doing. Short prayers, walking outside, or asking for help – these all bring me back." This is good advice for anyone.

Sr. Bernadette

Retreat Center Offerings

retreats@shmon.org
256-734-8302
www.shmon.org
January 2020-July 2020

Introduction to Centering Prayer
January 24-26, 2020
Contemplative Outreach
Birmingham Staff

Letting Go and Letting God: The Wisdom of Twelve-Step Spirituality
March 7, 2020
Sister Therese Haydel, O.S.B

Holy Week at the Monastery
April 9-12, 2020
Benedictine Sisters

Intensive Centering Prayer
May 1-3, 2020
Contemplative Outreach
Birmingham Staff

Thomas Merton and Women
May 8-10, 2020
Bonnie Thurston, Ph.D.

8 – Day Intensive/Post Intensive Centering Prayer
May 26- June 2, 2020
Contemplative Outreach Staff

Hope and Healing for the Spousal Loss Survivor
July 10-12, 2020
Rev. Steve Sweatt; Jan Owen

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• Charitable Trusts • Gifts-in-Kind

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
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Retreat Center Update

Our Retreat Center ministry has been strong and active with many comings and goings of groups and individuals this past fall. Among the highlights:

In early October we joined in the local Oktoberfest activities with a Lunch and Learn program entitled Oktoberblest. The event featured a German menu, Bavarian décor, and a program on St. Gertrude the Great, a German saint. This was the first in what will be an annual Oktoberblest Lunch and Learn in which we plan to complement our city's Oktoberfest activities with a focus on the spiritual heritage bequeathed us by saints from Germanic lands.

In late October, the Retreat Center hosted members of Region 5 of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious for their fall meeting. The event drew leaders of women's religious communities from Louisiana, Florida, Mississippi, and Alabama. Participating in the meeting from Sacred Heart were Sisters Tonette Sperando, Priscilla Cohen, Lynn Marie McKenzie, and Elisabeth Meadows.

Sr. Mary Adrian helped decorate for the Oktoberblest Lunch and Learn.

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

The Oblates of Sacred Heart Monastery gathered at the Retreat Center in October for their annual retreat. Sister Priscilla Cohen, OSB, Oblate Director for Sacred Heart Monastery, was the presenter. She spoke on the theme of *"Sharing the Gift of Benedictine Hospitality in Our World Today."* In this picture, Oblates enjoy sharing with one another at table. Please see page 8 for more coverage of the retreat.

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."*

If you are interested in becoming an Oblate affiliated with Sacred Heart Monastery, please contact Sister Priscilla Cohen (priscillacohen@hotmail.com).

In Sympathy

Our community mourns the loss of our Sr. Mary Grace Mecke, O.S.B. (see pg. 3). We also share in the sorrow of our Sisters and their families who have lost family members: Sr. Sherrie Brainard upon the death of her mother, Laura Brianard; Sr. Mary Adrian McLean on the death of her sister-in-law, Isle McLean; Sr. Minona D'Souza for the loss of her brother-in-law, Mario Braganza; Sr. Regina Barrett, upon the death of her nephew, Mark Mahoney; and Sr. Tonette Sperando on the loss of her great-uncle, Joseph Monte.

We extend our sympathy to the monks of St. Bernard Abbey upon the loss of Fr. Kevin McGrath, O.S.B. We also extend sympathy to Oblate Mary Reid whose mother, Barbara Stidham, recently went to God.

Among alumni who have gone to God: Adalaide Fitzgibbon, '44; Yara Marrasé, '48; Christine Webb, '56; Frances Davidson Wilkins, '67; David Sandlin, '72; Tobby Blackwood, '75. We also mourn with alumni who have lost loved ones: Mitzi Hassell Brumleve, '76, for the loss of her husband, Walter Bernard Brumleve; and Colleen Fitzgibbon Meloney, '70, on the loss of her mother, Adalaide Fitzgibbon.

We remember friends who have died: Rev. Msgr. William James of the Archdiocese of Mobile; Rev. Camillus Blazak, Rev. James Handerhan, and Msgr. Eugene O'Connor of the Diocese of Birmingham; A.C. Short; Betty Huetteman; Yolande Roy; Dolores Anderson; Catherine (Kitty) Owens; Josephine "Josie" Patti Merritt; George Laux; Vernon Miller; and Robert Luckie.

Requiescant in Pace.

Coming soon..

A new www.shmon.org!

We are revising our website and the new site should be on-line sometime in December. Check out new functions such as on-line retreat registration, a prayer request submission form, quotes from the Sisters, and expanded Meet the Sisters section, and more...

As the school year was getting off to a start, the principals of diocesan schools within the Diocese of Birmingham gathered in our Retreat Center where Sr. Tonette led them in a time of retreat. The community is grateful for the many diocesan connections we have and we are always glad for the chance to share together.

A Note From Development

(Continued from page 2)

Donations to the Sacred Heart Monastery Foundation: Your continued gifts to the Sacred Heart Monastery Foundation will help to assure that Sacred Heart Monastery may continue to be a source of spiritual renewal for both now and in the future.

Planned/Deferred Gifts: Wills and Bequests provide a means to make contributions. In this way, you can be assured that a portion of your estate will be of service to others through supporting the life and ministries of the Sisters. By remembering the Benedictine Sisters of Cullman in your will, you can ensure that part of your estate will continue to benefit others through the work of the Sisters.

Preserving our heritage: For those who prefer to contribute to a specific project, we are currently working to update our methods of preservation and storage of the community's archives. Others have told us, including professional archivists, that our archives are a treasure. We think so, too!

If you have an interest in preserving the history and heritage of the Benedictine Sisters, please contact Sister Karen Ann for more information.

If you have any suggestions, concerns, or if you would like to donate, please don't hesitate to call Sister Karen Ann, 256-615-6071, write a note, or e-mail development@shmon.org.

God bless you for your generosity and loving support.

Digitizing archival documents and photographs such as this one of Ottilia Hall in 1918 is an important element in being able to tell our story of Benedictine life in Alabama and properly preserve the documents that help tell this story.

Oblates Gather for Annual Retreat

(left to right) Angie Barberena, Pat Ryan, Vicki Seeger, Barbara Starling, and Jean Shanks made their final oblation

(left to right) Barbara Giffors, Nancy Heck, Jane Searcy, and David White were enrolled as Oblate Candidates

The annual retreat of our Oblate community focused on Chapter 53 of the Rule of St. Benedict, The Reception of Guests. Hospitality is one of the core values of Benedictine living. We are called to true attentive listening, a single focus on the other. We are called to truly listen and to see Christ in others and to be always lovingly attentive as Christ is to us. Yet, hospitality is a challenge in our fast-paced lives. In order to be hospitable, we must be prayerful and maintain a healthy balance in our lives. St. Benedict's exhortation is appropriate for our world today. *"All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, who said: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me' (Matt. 25:35)"* RB 53.1.

The Oblates gathered for their 2019 Annual Retreat

Various Scripture sources and passages from the Rule of St. Benedict were used for personal reflection and sharing. The Oblates shared how they practice the gift of hospitality in their home, church, workplace, and the world.

Under the direction of Sister Tonette Sperando, Prioress, and Sister Priscilla Cohen, Oblate Director, twenty-two Oblates renewed their Oblation. Four inquirers were enrolled as candidates: Nancy Heck (Birmingham), Jane Searcy (Tuscaloosa), David White (Athens), and Barbara Gifford (Decatur, GA). Angie Barbarena (Thompsons Station, TN), Pat Ryan (Birmingham), Vicki Seeger (Wetumpka), Jean Shanks (Birmingham), and Barbara Starling (Decatur, AL) made their Final Oblation.

Benedictine Update

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Sisters Tonette and Lynn Marie attend international Benedictine meeting in Mexico

In September, Sisters Tonette and Lynn Marie attended the Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum (CIB) Conference of Delegates meeting in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Sr. Lynn Marie chaired the meeting as Moderator of the CIB. Sr. Tonette attended as a delegate from Region 9. They gathered with 21 Benedictine women from 11 different CIB regions worldwide. During a portion of their week of meetings, CIB participants met jointly with the Synod of Abbot Presidents of the Benedictine Confederation, also gathered from across the globe.

Sisters Tonette and Lynn Marie cantor during Vespers

Sr. Tonette, reflecting on the meeting, said "Although we live in different countries, speak different languages, live our Benedictine way of life according to varied cultures, our Benedictine language is universal. We hold the same beliefs and values about our Benedictine charism. We acknowledge the cries from the people of our world who summon us, as Benedictine women in today's times, to be the voice and arms of hospitality, peace, and unity. We are being called to give witness as people with diverse backgrounds living in peace and harmony."

The group made a pilgrimage to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City.