

**Remembering
Barbara Britton O'Donohue**
St. Mary's Academy, Class of 1960



**Connecting
Point**

A Letter from the Prioress



Sr. Susan Hutchens, OSB
Prioress

Dear Friends,

Welcome! It is an honor and a delight to greet you in this issue of Connecting Point. As the Monastery remains closed to guests, we miss being together at prayers and Sunday Eucharist. We also miss the volunteers who serve our community and the many friends who visit with the Sisters, and we pray that you are well. I look forward to the time when we can again welcome you into our home after the global pandemic is eliminated.

Zen master and Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh says: “Our true home is in the present moment... To live in the present moment is a miracle.”** Such truth is held in those words for us at this time. What do we see at our present moment? We see the pandemic across the world which honors no borders. We see the concern for so many others, for ourselves, and our country at this divisive time in our history. Through the Presidential election, we recognize the many issues our society is facing -- such as economic loss, justice not met, peace undone, racism across the land, and people going hungry, without work and alone. We feel and hold a concern for the entire world.

While we see through the lens of the pandemic, let us also look at the gifts we all possess and share. Individually, we have been blessed with so many gifts, although we can't use all of them right now due to the need to isolate ourselves. Our society is based on social movement, constant noise, fast-paced living, and long work days with many people. We are not accustomed to isolation, quiet and aloneness at home, yet this is what many of us are experiencing.

Let us look at how we are using our gifts in new ways during this time, and specifically the gift of hospitality which is so precious for Benedictines, and all who share our values. Here at the Monastery, we are unable to prepare and deliver a hot meal to the Rock Island township community center as we normally do each month, but now we are preparing sack lunches for distribution even more often. Maybe like us, you are using this time to better develop the gift of patience. You may be pursuing a specific topic of interest, being more intentional about time for reflection, or reaching out in hospitality by calling a different friend each day. Perhaps you are discovering new things about those with whom you live, what your children or grandchildren are learning, or what matters most to you.

All of these ways of communicating are gifts we share at this unprecedented time in our history. Although we can't choose what is happening now – we can choose to live well through these times by being faithful to our calling. If our true home is the present moment, let us make the most of these present moments, always remembering that Christ walks with us each moment of every day.

Peace and blessings,

Sr. Susan Hutchens, OSB

** Quoted by Kerry Temple, editor in Notre Dame Magazine, Spring, 2020.



Sr. Stefanie and students

A Vocations Update

By Sr. Stefanie MacDonald, OSB, Director of Vocations

Teaching at Our Lady of Grace Academy in East Moline, Illinois, looks different this year. Typically, the children learn while sitting on the floor, or rubbing elbows at tables with other students. To protect the students' health and maintain sanitation in the classroom, each child now sits at a desk. This requires me to teach differently, to find new ways to encourage social and emotional skills, in addition to teaching daily lessons.

My role as Vocations Director has also changed. When the monastery closed in April, most of the Vocation programming was cancelled. To compensate, I collaborated with other Benedictine vocation colleagues to create a Midwest Benedictine Virtual Discernment Retreat. The event was designed for single women to explore how Benedictine values can help them understand where God is moving in their lives.

Twelve women attended the retreat from Minnesota, Texas, Indiana, Illinois, Florida and Argentina. The event was co-hosted by Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery (Bismarck, ND), Benedictine Sisters of Chicago, St. Scholastica Monastery (Chicago, IL), Sisters of the Order of Saint Benedict: Saint Benedict's Monastery (St. Joseph, MN), Sisters of St. Benedict: Monastery Immaculate Conception, (Ferdinand, IN).

The pandemic also dramatically changed my daily personal life. Since I teach outside of the monastery and the rest of my community is semi-quarantined, I now live alone at the Benet House Retreat Center. Being away from my community is challenging. Missing the social times and meals with the Sisters is hard, but I especially miss communal prayer. Praying the Liturgy of the Hour aloud is comforting to me, and I find power in hearing the words daily. Lighting a candle at my dining room table for prayer also brings a familiar rhythm to my evenings. I also miss celebrating Mass with my community, and enjoy joining St. John's Abbey online every Sunday morning.

I have learned new things about myself as a result of the pandemic. This time has reinforced my love of communal prayer and community life. As we watch the seasons change and approach the holidays in the midst of a pandemic, may we find peace in the beauty of Creation... ***"that in all things, God may be glorified"***.

If you would like to learn more about life at St. Mary Monastery, contact Sr. Stefanie MacDonald, OSB, Director of Vocations, at smacdonald@smmsisters.org.

Oblates Moving Forward in the Age of Technology

By Sr. Ruth Ksycki, OSB, Director of Oblates

On January 15, 1962, Mother Henrita Osendorf of St. Benedict's Monastery, St. Joseph, MN, wrote to Abbot Primate Benno Gut, asking that oblates affiliated with their community be permitted to make their oblation at their convent instead of at the Abbey. On January 31, 1962, Mother Osendorf received the permission, which began the preparation, collaboration and spread of the Oblate Program for women's communities in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

In 1978 Sr. Anna Hanna was appointed the first Oblate Director of St. Mary Monastery and received the first oblate on July 23, 1978. The program continued to grow to include groups at the monastery and in locations where the Sisters taught in schools. Currently at St. Mary Monastery, there are over 100 oblates with 7 candidates and 11 inquirers in formation in seven locations.

I began my appointment as Oblate Director in 2005 and realize that the planting and nourishing of those directors before me has produced a wonderful harvest within the oblate community. I have been inspired by their spiritual growth and the Benedictine presence and service in their communities. I am also grateful for the oblates who volunteer their services as Advisory Board members or coordinators of their area groups along with Sisters Mary Schmidt, Rachel Bergschneider and Marianne Burkhard.

During the pandemic, we are connecting with our communities in new ways. In October, we held the first-ever virtual Annual Oblate Day with the theme, "Summons to Live the Oblate Promises". Our goal was to strengthen the bond with the Sisters and with one another by sharing the story of our summons to seek God, and ways we are living out our oblation.



Sr. Ruth Ksycki, OSB, in the St. Mary Monastery Chapel

The Bloomington-Normal group met in person earlier this year, and their second meeting was held virtually. Madeleine Callahan participated in a virtual prayer service to pray for an end to racism and violence. Sharon McNamara initiated a group to learn about "Faith and Racial Healing." The Macomb group connected via Zoom with Amy Carr as host and Sister Marianne Burkhard as coordinator.

Sr. Mary Schmidt met with the Nauvoo group, with this year's program starting virtually. The Illinois Valley group met via Zoom, email and phone through the efforts of Deena Pavinato and Sr. Mary. The Monastery recently upgraded technology to assist with Zoom meetings, and Sr. Ruth hosted two sessions virtually with the Quad Cities group.

The Sisters of St. Benedict are proud to be partners with our amazing community of oblates.

If you are interested in our Oblate Program, please contact Sr. Ruth Ksycki at rksycki@smmsisters.org.

Living Benedictine Spirituality in the Present

By Oblates Ric and Cynthia Smith



Ric and Cynthia Smith of Muscatine, Iowa

Ric and Cynthia Smith of Muscatine, Iowa were approaching a new life season in 2004. As a church and community choral musician, Ric was at a personal crossroads, ready to deprioritize his professional goals and pursue a more intense spiritual path for the “second half.” Cynthia was transitioning from being primarily a mom to seeking a new spiritual emphasis to undergird her life.

Ric shared, “Walking and talking as we often do, Cynthia perceptively remarked that the way of Benedictine oblation, or offering, might be something for us to explore.” Years earlier, Ric and Cynthia had read Kathleen Norris’s *Cloister Walk*, and were moved by her passage into the Oblate life.

In 2002, St. Mary Monastery opened the Benet House Retreat Center. Ric and Cynthia scheduled a private retreat, and were greeted by Sr. Catherine Cleary. Ric recalls, “I inquired about the Oblate program and also spiritual direction, and Sr. Catherine directed me to helpful resources.”

Ric began spiritual direction with Sr. Catherine and joined the Quad Cities oblate group with Sr. Teresa Ann Harrington. Cynthia began seeing Ric’s spiritual life deepen, and she noticed the words of the Psalms in the voices of the Sisters were becoming an inner landscape. Ric and Cynthia began a regular practice of *Lectio Divina*, and two years later, Cynthia joined the Quad Cities oblate group.

The companionship Ric and Cynthia found with other oblates provided the inspiration to live out the Benedictine values. “Ric and I adopted the concept of our marriage being a monastery, which led to profound changes over time,” shared Cynthia. Hugh Feiss, OSB, calls this ‘a continuum of imperceptible change’. Ric added, “Our marriage has become our

place of mutual obedience as we work to consider each other before ourselves. After 40 years, our marriage has been both the source and school of stability in the Benedictine sense. We each, whether we know it or not, urge the other toward constant conversion in the life of faith.”

In 2009, Ric traveled to Rome to participate in the International Congress of Benedictine Oblates, while back home Cynthia was making her final Oblation. In 2019, Cynthia joined the St. Mary Monastery community for a pilgrimage in Italy to walk in the footsteps of St. Benedict. Cynthia recalled, “Traveling with other oblates and seeing how each of us individually live out the Rule was inspiring, enlightening and affirming.”

Over the past 16 years, the Benedictine Sisters of St. Mary Monastery, St. Benedict and the Rule have guided Ric and Cynthia toward a greater joy. Sr. Ruth added: “A special highlight for the Sisters was Ric singing the Exultet at our Easter Vigil in 2019”.

The Rule of St. Benedict has shaped Ric and Cynthia’s roles as parents and grandparents, and brought deeper meaning to relationships. Through the Muscatine Children’s and Youth Choirs they forged partnerships in Kosovo and in Haiti to lead summer music programs for children. In closing, Ric added, “We see every relationship, whether in family, parish, friendships, or choirs as a means of God’s formation in our life, and for those around us.”



Barbara Britton O'Donohue with her beloved children of Pokot, Kenya, Africa

Remembering Barbara Britton O'Donohue, St. Mary's Academy, Class of 1960

By Mary Ann Cahill Weakley, class of '53, with Leslie Gwozdz

Twenty-three years ago, Barb traveled to Africa at the request of a friend asking for help with his Bible class. An African trip was not on Barb's "things-I've-always-wanted-to-do" list, however, she agreed to go for three weeks.

Prior to the trip to Africa, she had chosen a property in Wyoming for retirement. After years managing her own successful business in Lincoln, Illinois, she was ready for Wyoming.

Arriving in Pokot, Kenya, Africa, Barb's heart was captured. Struck by the sight of small children sitting on the ground—hungry and sick—but wide-eyed and eager to know more stories of this Jesus person.

Barb felt called to utilize her business background to establish COPE (Children of Pokot Education), a 501(c)3 to raise funds for a school. She then felt her work was done and looked forward to Wyoming.

When the building was complete, the Pokot people invited her back for the opening of the school. Realizing there was still much to do for the community, as she would tell it, she was "zapped" by God.

Barb began spending three months at a time in Pokot and three months back home raising funds for the Mission. Her plan included instruction on the life of Jesus.

In 2001, Barb built a home for herself with personal funds—a step up from her original thatch hut home. Soon children with nowhere to go came to her. She adopted 30 orphaned children, abandoned or abused; today 70 children live in the COPE House.

Traveling to and from Pokot entailed long and arduous trips. Pokot is a primitive area in the bush—sometimes very dangerous. Barb developed a relationship with the Chief of Pokot. From him she learned to respect their culture, never trying to westernize them.

Classroom buildings for the school were finished in 2012. The children have long school days resulting in achievements above their peers in Kenyan metropolitan areas. The Pokot community builds all of the structures. Bricks are made by compressing materials into a hand-made machine, forming bricks, then baking them in the sun.

Barb's goal for the COPE Mission was for the people to own and care for the buildings themselves. They receive no government assistance from Kenya or the U.S., and no mission groups come in to help.

Today, Barb's legacy is a successful school for 650 students, school buildings for preschool through eighth grade, a kitchen, a bakery, a health dispensary, and a Relief Food program. COPE employs 50 Pokot people. The mission makes and sells bread to the people, and they supply the school feeding program and relief food. Clean water is available, but they have to pay for it – just enough for system upkeep. However minimal, they pay for school and food. If unable to pay, the people work for it.

Until her death, Barb was Executive Director of the COPE Mission, assisted by an Administrative staff and a U.S. Board. Three full-time young men—graduates of COPE House—manage the mission.

The Corona Virus disrupted the school feeding program which normally provides two meals a day for 650 students and 40 employees. Meals consist of a bowl of porridge twice a day heated in a large kettle on the dirt floor. The mission normally gives relief food to 570 families from March through August. With the virus, they are now feeding 970 families September through December.

COPE Mission is the accomplishment of one amazing woman. Barb O'Donohue took a primitive village in the Kenyan bush and showed them how to be self-sustaining and educate their children.

Barb never tried to make Pokot a little America, she taught them how it could be a nice little Pokot. They listened and learned and continue to maintain their life as she instructed.

St. Mary's Academy and St. Mary Monastery can be proud of Barbara O'Donohue, her life and her legacy. She was a member of the St. Mary Monastery community from 1960 to 1966, and in 2004 Barb visited the community in Rock Island. She passed away on August 18, 2020 from lung cancer at age 77.



TOP: Barb sings a worship song with children of COPE House
BOTTOM: Barb holds one of her many adopted children

Food for the children is always a challenge and donations are most welcome. Send to COPE Ministry, P.O. Box 903, Lincoln, IL 62656. Or donate online at: <https://cope.breezechms.com/give/online>



Mary Ann Cahill Weakley, author, *Monastery to Matrimony*, and coming soon—*The Story of Little Rose Beecher*, SMA Class of 1890. Contact: maweakley4@gmail.com



Leslie Gwozdz, COPE Board Member and Treasurer, is a Park Ranger at Dinosaur National Monument, Utah in summers. She lives in Orlando, FL in winter.

Join us for a Virtual Retreat!

The Benet House Retreat Center team is excited to present a wide array of virtual retreats, open for registration now and accessible anywhere in the world. Below are our upcoming November virtual retreats and an early look at our exciting January virtual Directed Retreat.

Experiencing Transitions

Nov. 2, 9, 16, 23, 30. Meets on Mondays with two meeting options: 9:00 - 10:00 AM OR 6:30 PM - 7:30 PM. Treat your spirit to an hour a week with Sr. Joyce Rupp, O.S.M., and her new 10 week video series on Transitions.

Lectio Divina

Weekly on Tuesdays: Nov. 3, 10, 17, 24. 9:00 AM - 10:00 AM. The Word of God comes to us in many forms, and Lectio Divina is the foundation for Benedictine prayer.

Centering Prayer

Weekly on Wednesdays: Nov. 4, 11, 18, 25. 1:00 PM - 2:30 PM. Centering Prayer is an ancient form of praying based on the words of Jesus, “When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret.” (Mt. 6:6)

Wisdom Women Series: Rejoice and Discover Our Wisdom

Thursday, Nov. 5: 10:00 AM - 11:00 AM or 6:30 PM - 7:30 PM. Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding. (Prov. 3:13) Join us for this introductory meeting, with future dates and times to be determined.

Directed Retreat: Praying for Peace Using the Prayers of John Philip Newell

Fri, Nov. 6 at 7:00 PM - Mon, Nov. 9 at Noon. Consider a 3-day directed retreat with a focus on Prayers of John Philip Newell.



Boundless Compassion Circles

Weekly on Wednesdays: Nov. 4, 11, 18, 25. 9:30 AM - 11:00 AM. Compassion Circle is a weekly gathering for anyone who has participated in a Boundless Compassion retreat, book study or DVD series.

Compassion to Self: A Day for You

Saturday, Nov. 14: 9:00 AM - 4:00 PM. Compassion to self allows us to manage the many demands in our life.

Reclaiming a Sense of Wonder: A Vision of Advent

Saturday, Nov. 21, 2020: 9:00 AM - 4:00 PM. Join Judith Valente, award-winning author, print and broadcast journalist, poet and essayist for this retreat.

January 2021

January 2021 Directed Retreat “What Do You See?” John 1:35-42 5-Day Retreat Option: *Fri, Jan. 15 at 8:00 AM - Wed, Jan. 20 at 7:00 PM. 3-Day Retreat Option: Fri, Jan. 15 at 8:00 AM - Mon, Jan. 18 at 7:00 PM.* You will meet daily with a spiritual director and have an opportunity for Centering Prayer and Lectio Divina. You will need a candle, bible, and prayer space in your home.

To view our full Virtual Retreat Listing, visit smmsisters.org/virtual-retreats or call (309) 283-2108 or email us at retreats@smmsisters.org.

Leadership of Women Religious (LCWR)

Prioress Sr. Susan Hutchens attended the 2020 LCWR conference, a three day virtual event with over 800 in attendance. The conference explored ways to learn and practice leadership during this unique era in religious life.

Annual Oblate Day

The first virtual St. Mary Monastery Oblate Day was held on October 17th, and the theme was “Summons to Live the Oblate Promises”. Featured speakers included **Prioress Sr. Susan Hutchens**, **Sr. Ruth Ksycki**, and Oblates John Gruidl and Marlene Moshage.

Annual Founders Day

The Sisters celebrated Founders Day on October 15th with prayers, Mass and a special evening meal. Eucharistic liturgy was broadcast via livestream on Facebook. **Sr. Marianne Burkhard** gave a presentation to the community on their history from 1897 to 1912.



St. Joseph Evening Meal

On Fridays, Sisters meet in the Dining Room to pack lunch bags for the Rock Island Community Township. The Sisters normally serve a hot meal, but due to the pandemic, only sack lunches are permitted.

Midwest Benedictine Virtual Discernment Retreat

Sr. Stefanie MacDonald participated in an August event designed to help young women explore how the vows and Benedictine values can help understand where God is moving in their lives.

Benedictine Inter-Federation Archives Conference

Sr. Marilyn Roman, Archivist, attended the first Benedictine Inter-Federation Archives conference by videos and Zoom on October 6th and 7th. The meeting shared best practices for preserving our Benedictine heritage.



Monastery Gardens

The Sisters enjoy reaping the fruits of their garden. **Sr. Mary Schmidt** is pictured with a recent harvest.

Litany of Love

during this time of the Pandemic

Our sisters and brothers who are ill with COVID-19 and their families and friends who accompany them through their pain, sickness and death, **call out to us.**

Let us remember them in prayer and respond in ways that will help bring an end to this global pandemic.

Our sisters and brothers of color **call out to us** these days with the pain of living under an equal law that is not always enforced equally.

Let us remember them in prayer and work toward the greater and equal good of all.

Our sisters and brothers who suffer from hunger, loss of employment, shelter, or health care, and loss of dignity in being able to provide for themselves and their families **call out to us.**

Let us remember them in prayer and offer assistance and support for them as we are able.

Our sisters and brothers who are homeless, whether in our country, at the border, or across the entire world, **call out to us.**

Let us remember them in prayer and hold them in the hospitality and homes of our hearts.

We ask God to show us the way to bring about change in a world so desperately in need of comfort, equality, and justice for all.

Written by Prioress Sr. Susan Hutchens, OSB



In Memoriam . . .

Maureen McHale Airsman '64, died on August 22, 2020.

Ken Borrows, husband of **Helen Myers Borrows '59**, died on October 5, 2020.

Mary Lou Bushell '46, died on August 10, 2020.

Jessica Breen Dennis '77 died on June 5, 2020.

Benita "Bea" Bride Gavin '48, died on September 14, 2020.

Rosemary Kelly, (formerly Sr. Annunciata, OSB), died on August 1, 2020.

Nancy Tully Louthan '59, died on July 20, 2020. Her mother, Geraldine Tully, also died on July 20, 2020.

Susana Martinez '90 died October 15, 2020.

Carolyn Caldwell Nicholson '59, died on August 20, 2020.

Barbara Britton O'Donohue '60, died on August 18, 2020.

Editor's Note: We wish to expand this In Memoriam section to include the passing of St. Mary's Academy Alumnae, St. Mary Monastery Oblates, Volunteers, or immediate family members. To report the passing of a loved one, please email: benedictines@smmsisters.org



Remembrance Candles for All Souls' Day

The Sisters visited Calvary Cemetery in Rock Island, IL on Monday, November 2, to pray at the gravesites for the Benedictine Sisters of St. Mary Monastery.





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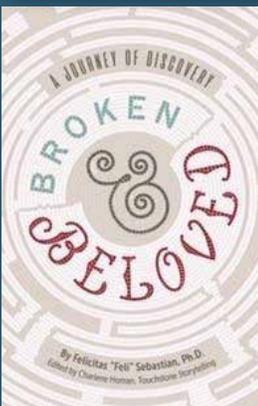


Broken and Beloved: A Journey of Discovery

Oblate Feli Sebastian Publishes First Book

A book of self-discovery and transformation, Feli takes the reader through the rutted roads of the Philippines, along the coast of the Bay of Bengal in South India, and across the American heartland on her quest to find inner peace.

Teaching in the Philippines before immigrating to the United States, Feli explored the Catholic Sisterhood, lived in an ashram in India, and earned her Ph.D. in counseling. Although her path was unfamiliar, Feli listened to God's calling to help others. In 2015, she created Labyrinth Outreach Services to help formerly incarcerated women find their path to freedom. A portion of the proceeds will benefit YWCA Labyrinth Outreach Services to Women.



**Would you prefer to receive a
digital copy of Connecting Point?**

Please email us at:
jgull@smmsisters.org