

# Benet House Retreat Center Re-Opens!



**Connecting  
Point**

# Refashioned for Love



**Sr. Susan Hutchens, OSB**  
*Prioress*

Dear Friends,

There was a point this summer when I jubilantly felt we could say, “Life wasn’t just a bowl of cherries,” but rather a beautiful bowl of ripe summer cherries, blueberries, raspberries and peaches too! We were beginning to feel hope that the COVID virus was subsiding. Small freedoms were returning to our lives as we were reaching some level of herd immunity. We began visiting family and friends again, picking up meals-to-go and eating outside. For some of us, it meant being together with loved ones we had not seen since summer 2019. Our community looked forward to opening the monastery doors just a bit to welcome a few guests for Sunday Eucharist.

Progress was nearing completion on our new solar energy project. Gardens were in bloom, and life felt “right” again. Maybe not quite normal, but we felt a lifting of heaviness which enveloped our lives. Then all of a sudden someone hit the “pause” button!

Although we have been blessed with good health, we watched as the Delta virus spread. For a brief period, the lack of rain turned the monastery grounds from vibrant greens into browns. The solar project was put on hold unexpectedly as we waited for a necessary part to arrive.

We face a situation today of being asked again to surrender our needs, desires and delights, for the needs and welfare of others. As Christians, this is part of our understanding of morality – considering the good of others, the “common good” as part of our call to “Love All”, as we would desire to be loved. Jesus taught us that no one lives for oneself or dies for oneself. We live out of love – total all-encompassing love for humanity and all creation – for everything is a gift from the God who created us.

Hoffsman Ospino, a professor of theology at Boston College, states that “surrender” is not a relinquishing of our wants or selves, but rather is “the art of allowing ourselves to be delightfully fashioned and refashioned by the other because of love.” \*\*

Our love must be for the ‘corporate body’ – the whole. Corpus means “body”. Jesus allowed his body to die so that we could all be refashioned for love – for God, by our receiving over and over again the Body of Christ as gift in the Eucharist. We have no idea what our refashioning will be – but without it, we will not be.

Fall brings so many new beginnings to people and nature. Let us see each day as a new beginning. We can trust God enough to know life still moves forward, even if it seems to be on “pause” for a little longer. Hope is still alive in our midst!

Peace and Blessings,

Sr. Susan Hutchens, OSB

\*\**Give Us This Day, Reflection for Aug 22, 2021 p. 237*



*Blessing at the Missioning Ceremony in Chapel*

## Living in Community

By Sr. Stefanie MacDonald, OSB, Director of Vocations

Living in a monastic community is the best counterweight against individualism in our society today. “Our mission is to seek God and create sacred space within self, community and the world. We strive to be instruments through which love, justice and peace are manifest and God is glorified.” (St. Mary Monastery community, 1992)

Teaching children at Our Lady of Grace Academy in East Moline, IL brings a deep joy to my life. However, for months while I was teaching in the classroom, I needed to live at Benet House to protect my community from potential exposure to the virus. Living apart from community, I could put my needs first, yet I deeply missed gathering for communal prayer in the mornings and evenings. I missed eating meals together and the many daily acts of serving one another.

When the ‘Me First’ perspective appears in our workplace, home or society, we pay a high price. We are created to be in community – living *with* each other, not *next* to others. To become who God creates me to be – I need others to be on the same path.

**“... And may Christ bring us all together to everlasting life.”**

- RB 72.12

St. Benedict knew how difficult it would be for monks to live together in peace ... and yet peace is one of the hallmarks of Benedictine monasticism. In The Rule, Benedict provides guidance that supports peace among the monks. One example he provides is insisting that all monks receive what they need, that individual differences be respected, and that weaknesses be accepted.

This requires living in community, and is made possible by our daily prayer. Our prayer life weaves peace into the fabric of our days, promoting harmony (which is neither conformity nor uniformity).

Whether we are in chapel, in the dining room or in the community room, the St. Mary Monastery community comes together for the purpose of seeking God. We follow The Rule, which guides us ably. We make peace, find joy, and make our way to the Kingdom. Together.

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](mailto:smacdonald@smmsisters.org).



*Benet House team Lorene Knobbe, Sr. Jackie Walsh and Sr. Bobbi Bussan*

## Benet House Re-Opens!

September brought beautiful weather to the St. Mary Monastery community, along with a ‘soft’ re-opening of the Benet House Retreat Center. The monastery originally planned to be fully open to guests in the fall, but remains cautious with the variant at such a high level.

The Benet House Retreat Center closed its doors in March, 2020 in response to the global pandemic. Observing the unique challenges the virus presented, Sister Bobbi Bussan, Subprioress and Director of Benet House Retreat Center, created a virtual retreat designed to reach individuals and groups experiencing stress during the pandemic.

Soon a variety of additional virtual Benet House retreats were available to enrich retreatants during a difficult time. Sr. Bobbi shared, “I never imagined we would be creating virtual retreats, but it has been a terrific way to connect with our existing Benet House friends, and to reach new audiences.”

In the last 16 months Benet House held 10 weekly or monthly ongoing retreats and 11 one-time virtual retreats. These programs have drawn participants from across the United States and Canada, as well as Ireland and New Zealand.

Since July, individual overnight retreatants were welcomed at Benet House. In person evening and day programs began in September.

Additional personnel were added to support the ministries of Benet House. Lorene Knobbe joined the team as Program Assistant, and she will coordinate the volunteer program and assist with retreat programs and coverage. Kristine Thornton is the new housekeeper caring for Benet House.

The infrastructure of Benet House was upgraded over the summer as new furnaces and air conditioning units were installed. The newly activated monastery solar panels produce up to 80% of the electricity needed for the retreat center.

To meet the needs of expanding audiences, a conference digital audio/visual system will be installed. The new system will allow for streaming to the web, recording for webinars, and accommodating virtual speakers for presentations and retreats.

Hospitality is at the heart of Benet House, and expanded volunteer options include Benet House ‘pray-ers’, ambassadors and hospitality hosts.

January 2022 will mark the 20th anniversary for Benet House Retreat Center. Built as a place apart to seek the Holy One for persons of all faiths, Benet House offers a unique retreat setting of peace, beauty and tranquility.

The new retreat calendar for 2021-2022 includes 'Reflections on the Rule of St. Benedict' weekend retreat, facilitated by Oblate Susan Ramiro and Sr. Bobbi. A new day program called 'The Benedictine Journey' will be offered, highlighting aspects of Benedictine history, values and spirituality.

Retreat programs for the 2021-2022 year will offer both in-person and virtual retreats. For information on upcoming retreats, visit [www.smmsisters.org/retreats](http://www.smmsisters.org/retreats). The enhanced website fully supports online registration and payment. You may also call Sr. Jackie Walsh at (309) 283-2108 or email [retreats@smmsisters.org](mailto:retreats@smmsisters.org).



**The mission of the Benet House Retreat Ministry is to create a sacred space for people of all faiths who are seeking God through prayer, quiet and spiritual guidance; and to provide spiritual opportunities rooted in the Benedictine tradition.**



*St. Mary's Academy Alum, Linda Haas  
at Dancing Deer Farm, Georgetown, IN*

## St. Mary's Alum Linda Haas: Activist and Supporter of the Earth

By Mary Ann Cahill Weakley, class of '53

Linda Haas was raised in Nauvoo, Hancock County, Illinois and graduated from St. Mary's Academy in 1967. In the quiet of Sister Gregory's library at St. Mary's Academy, Linda dreamed of being a Maryknoll missionary. Reflecting on her life of service, Linda shared, "I definitely followed my missionary dreams – just not with the Maryknolls."

Linda has lived a life far more efficacious than one would have guessed from knowing the quiet first grader at SS Peter and Paul School in Nauvoo. After serving in the Peace Corps 1978-1980, she entered St. Mary Monastery at age 30. She subsequently left the monastic community and married the love of her life, Dave Moninger. Dave and Linda lived in California before returning to the Midwest where they purchased eleven and a half acres in southern Indiana. She and Dave named their home Dancing Deer Nature Farm.

Linda became a student of the regenerative farming revolution following Dave's death in 2018. Regenerative farming is a conservation and rehabilitation approach focusing on topsoil regeneration. Carbon drawn from the atmosphere by living plants helps build soil organic matter and

produces hope of reversing the effects of climate change. Partnering with friends Kevin and Benita Darst, Linda began her regenerative farming efforts by planting 20 hazelnut trees, then added more than 80 fruit and nut trees. The farm includes a system to capture rainwater for the gardens and trees.

Linda's education grew through information from the Iroquois Farmland Fund which supports farmers wanting to transition their land in support of the earth. She met additional mentors at Brambleberry Farm in Indiana.

Linda became a catalyst for regenerative farming in the Midwest. Her sister, Ann joined the movement and is now transforming her farm in Nauvoo to organic practices beginning with two acres of chestnut trees. Kevin and his brother are making the regenerative farming transition on their land as well. Linda explains, "If regenerative practices are implemented on enough land, we will begin to reverse global warming."

Beyond her care of the earth, Linda is a relentless activist for the marginalized in our society. During a humanitarian trip to Port-au-Prince, Haiti Linda

collaborated with SAKALA, a youth community center, and later returned to plant a breadfruit tree in a SAKALA garden in memory of Dave. In 2020, Daniel Tillias, founder of SAKALA and a 2019 CNN nominee for Hero of the Year, urged Linda to teach stress reduction techniques to Haiti refugees suffering from the trauma of violence. In the midst of a global pandemic, Linda traveled to Haiti, teaching the classes and instructing others to teach.

In 2020 Linda traveled to Brownsville, Texas with the Grannies Group to protest the inhumane treatment of families seeking refuge in the United States. If helping mothers and children on the Mexico border, teaching stress reduction to Haitians, and reversing the effects of climate change weren't enough, this energetic woman found another need.

Following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Linda completed classes at the Louisville, KY Earth and Spirit Center, and found a new way to serve. She invited women involved in the Black Lives Matter protests to her farm. As the women gathered herbs to create healing bundles for the protesters, they learned the healing power of medicinal herbs.

Dancing Deer Nature Farm has become a place of refuge as people experience safety and enjoy the healing gifts of nature. In Linda's words, "I know that so much of God's grace in my life is a result of Dave's love and gifts to me."

St. Mary's Academy can be proud of Linda Haas for giving her life in support of the earth and the underserved. Contact her at [lindadhaas@gmail.com](mailto:lindadhaas@gmail.com).



*Top: Kevin Darst, Farm Manager, inspecting some of the 100 trees planted since 2019.*

*Kevin Darst, Emily Morrell and Abby Rudolf work with former refugees on Catholic Charities Garden Project.*

*Pascaline Sinzinkayo stands beside Linda Haas.*

*Pascaline is a former refugee from Burundi who grows her own food along with other Burundi families on Linda's land.*



**Mary Ann Cahill Weakley**, author, *Monastery to Matrimony*, and coming soon – *Faith Unshaken*  
Contact: [maweakley4@gmail.com](mailto:maweakley4@gmail.com)



*Newly activated solar panels  
on monastery grounds*

## Summer Activities at the Monastery

### Solar Project

The Solar Photovoltaic arrays are now installed and activated. This solar energy project adds a new facet to the desire of the Sisters to live with a minimal carbon footprint. For several years, the community explored ways to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels. The “Illinois Solar for All” initiative made a long-awaited solar project feasible and affordable. The larger array will send electricity to the monastery to meet up to 98% of the annual electricity needs, and the smaller array will meet up to 80% of the needs for Benet House Retreat Center.

### Family Visits

As COVID restrictions eased, some Sisters traveled to visit their families and friends, while other family members visited the monastery.

Many Sisters spent time outside each day walking and feeling a welcomed freedom from the confinement of a long winter inside. Gardens sprang to life with the assistance of a few dedicated volunteers. Monastery friends visited and used the benches and monastery grounds for chatting with the Sisters.





*Abbot Gregory*

## Summer Retreat

According to monastery time, summer truly begins with the Sisters' annual retreat. This year the community welcomed Abbot Primate Gregory Polan, OSB, of Conception Abbey, Conception, MO, as retreat director. In 2016 Abbot Gregory was elected Abbot Primate of the worldwide Congress of Abbots. When Sister Sandra Brunenn was Prioress, she asked Abbot Gregory to lead the 2020 retreat, but he was unable to leave Italy due to COVID restrictions. She asked Abbot Gregory to consider coming in 2021, and he willingly agreed.

As the head of the Benedictine Confederation, Abbot Primate Gregory serves over 6,500 Benedictine monks in hundreds of male monasteries, and is the abbot of the monastery Sant' Anselmo in Rome, where he resides. Prioress Susan Hutchens studied in graduate school with Abbot Gregory and was delighted to re-connect with him to share stories of those days. In 2019, Sister Susan was a presenter with Abbot Gregory on the topic of "Hope" for the North American Benedictine Abbots and Prioresses.

The theme of the six-day annual retreat was "Living the Paschal Mystery in the Benedictine Life". Abbot Gregory's words integrated Scripture and the Rule of Benedict in a way that challenged the community by "calling us to walk into the heart of Christ" as Sister Charlotte Sonnevill commented.

## Chapter Meeting

The community held their summer chapter meetings on August 7th and 8th which included a Missioning ceremony and presentation of yearly assignments. Along with her particular service, each Sister is given a special group for whom she prays. These groups include our St. Mary's Academy alumnae, employees, neighbors, Oblates, immigrants, those in prison, and victims of racism, trafficking, or violence.



Mary Bruce

## A Treasure Hidden in a Field

By Mary Bruce, St. Mary Monastery Oblate

I paused at the door of St. Mary Monastery. Behind me was a circular driveway and behind the imposing white building lay a glimmering lake. Preparing to be a live-in volunteer at the monastery, I sensed adventure.

I learned the monastery's rhythm and chores, but also spent time staring out the wide window of my simply decorated bedroom. Soon the monastery's beauty, the thrice daily liturgy of the hours and community kindness began to affect me. In one conversation with a Sister, I unexpectedly began to cry. She said little, but the slight rise in her voice showed she was with me and had heard me - with her heart. I felt no loss of dignity or need to apologize.

I didn't realize what was going on inside me until a personal awakening on my birthday. I had received some cards and when I walked into the dining room for lunch, the Prioress stood up and said, "It's Mary's birthday, aren't we glad she's here!" The whole group broke into '*Happy Birthday Dear Mary*', and the familiar voices reminded me of their worship. The sun streaming through glass windows on their smiling singing faces created a wraparound halo. I held back tears, when then Prioress Sandra Brunenn presented me with a mug from the gift shop emblazoned with "St. Mary Monastery".

Returning to my room that evening, I gazed at the summer stars. I felt exquisitely happy and drifted off with "Happy Birthday," ringing in my mind. The Sisters were glad I'd been born. I knew I was loved and went to bed filled with light.

My experience as a live-in volunteer marked a major shift of focus. My life experience expanded from an old love plus a few friends to a much wider circle. That circle now included stars, immigrants, the elderly, an indigo sky, hungry people, those with cancer, and the circle keeps widening.

As a live-in volunteer, the Sisters' songs, silences and love transformed me and a re-creation happened. I didn't have to return to a daily grind because there wasn't one. I had been surprised by Light and there was no turning back.

## In Memoriam . . .

### Alumnæ

**Pauline Genusa '56**, died Oct. 29, 2011

**Bobby King**, husband of Debra Castrey King, '75, died June 3, 2021

**David Koechle**, husband of Marcia Herbert Koechle, ex – '64, died July 22, 2021

**Jean Garfunkel Miller '85**, died July 17, 2021

**Myles Murphy**, husband of Mary Jane Miller Murphy, '62 and SMM Oblate, died August 24, 2021

**Bonnie Siegfried**, mother of Alison Siegfried Purtle, '96, died September 9, 2021

**Marie Yehl**, mother of SMA alums Julianne Yehl DeVos, '64 (deceased in 1988), Mary Ellen Yehl Taets, '65, Emily Yehl Landers, '68, and Grandmother of Jeannie Landers, '89, died April 14, 2021. She died on her 101st birthday.

### Oblates

**Margaret Wikoff** died May 8, 2021

**Bernard Carr**, father of Oblate Amy Carr, died June 7, 2021



**Coming up in our next issue:**

**St. Mary Monastery Oblates**

**Oblate Day 2021**

**Benet House 20th Anniversary**



**Sisters of St. Benedict**  
St. Mary Monastery  
2200 88th Avenue West  
Rock Island, IL 61201-7649  
309-283-2100 • 309-283-2200 FAX  
[www.smmsisters.org](http://www.smmsisters.org)

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*Published by the Benedictine Sisters of  
St. Mary Monastery, Rock Island, IL 61201*

Phone: 309-283-2100

[Communications@smmsisters.org](mailto:Communications@smmsisters.org)

[www.smmsisters.org](http://www.smmsisters.org)

Jan Gull, Editor



## Upcoming Directed Retreats:

### 3 Day

Nov 11th – Nov 14th or  
Jan 16th – Jan 19th

### 5 Day

Nov 11th – Nov 16th or  
Jan 16th – Jan 21st

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