

Earth and Sun Praise the Lord!



Connecting
Point

What is it you seek?



Sr. Susan Hutchens, OSB
Prioress

Dear Friends,

Whenever I've been asked "What is your favorite season?" I've always had difficulty naming just one season. Maybe that is due to living my entire life in the Midwest where we experience all four seasons annually with their distinctive beauty as well as their drawbacks. I like to be warm, yet I wouldn't give up the splendor of snow shimmering like diamonds in the sunlight. Summer may be hot and humid, yet I love time at the lake with family and just being outdoors. The colors of Fall, the smell of wood fires, and leaves crunching under foot bring their own heart-warming beauty.

I've finally decided that Spring must be my favorite season - or at least it was this year! Spring is a realization of NEW LIFE, and God knows above all, that 'new life' is what we all desire and need after this difficult year of so many deaths, so many losses, so much isolation and tragedy throughout the world.

Our Christian faith has a question we find in many of our liturgical ceremonies: "What is it you seek?" We hear this asked before baptisms, professions of faith, and professions of vows. I even heard the question asked at a ceremony inducting a new and very eager altar boy. Jesus asked it of his disciples too when he said: "What are you looking for?" (Jn 1:38) Parents or sponsors respond to this question for young children at Baptism. Ultimately we each must answer this question for ourselves. Our answer is always: we seek God. We seek Christ, risen, alive in us, in our world, in one another, in our hearts.

Spring is the time of Easter joy – from the lighting of new fire at the Easter Vigil to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Springtime is a season of Joy!

We need joy this year. As Spring moves into Summer, new life is all around us: from the glory of red bud trees, white magnolias, yellow daffodils, and multi-colored tulips to every color of green imaginable as trees and plants fill parks and gardens with beds of color.

We too are called to "be beautiful" along with all of nature. To do this we must let our "colors of love" shine as we accept others as they are, reach out to those in need, care for all of creation, and open our hearts as we begin to open our homes and lives again, after these long months of shutdown.

May you experience a "new birth" as you seek the goodness of God within you. We continue to keep you in our prayers and look forward to seeing you before the next issue of Connecting Point makes its appearance in the Fall. Hope is alive!

Peace and Blessings,

Sr. Susan Hutchens, OSB



Finding Peace in Sacred Spaces

By Sr. Stefanie MacDonald, OSB, Director of Vocations

Throughout my life, I have found God in nature. Before entering the Benedictine community, I often sought prayerful solace alongside the Cedar River near my home in Cedar Rapids, IA. Sitting on my camping chair, I spent hours watching the river flow and wildlife swim and scamper around me. This became a holy practice, helping me focus and find inner peace. Alone in nature, I felt one with God.

In 2005, I visited St. Mary Monastery for the first time, and felt a similar experience. The community invited me into the chapel for Vespers on a beautiful summer evening, and nature was in full bloom. The Sisters designed the chapel to experience God's creation during prayers. Three of the chapel walls are floor-to-ceiling windows, looking out on the woods and lake.

Eight years after making my perpetual profession as a Benedictine Sister, the beauty of our prayerful chapel still takes my breath away. One day I saw an eagle fly past the windows, just beyond the altar. Through the trees, we often see deer in the meadow as geese and ducks paddle across the lake. In the summer, fireflies light up the grasses, and sunsets are breathtaking in every season. In times of joy or sorrow, my heart is always in the chapel. The sacred surroundings remind me of God's love and presence, and calls me to be God's love and presence for others.

As we continue to navigate through a global pandemic, I explore new places to help me focus and find inner peace. Warmer temperatures bring me outside to enjoy God's creation on the monastery grounds. I like to sit on the small bridge over the creek and see dragonflies' whirl from spot to spot. Hiking up to the prairie at the top of our hill, I watch butterflies dance across the meadow as turkeys trot down the path.

Nature is a place where I am one with God. I encourage you to find those treasured places in your life, to meet with God in a deep and special way. In discernment, we know that seeking and receiving God's wisdom is more precious than gold. Where are your sacred spaces? Make it a priority to develop your own holy practice to spend unhurried time with the God of all creation.

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.



Wildflowers and prairie grasses that cover the monastery grounds require no fertilizer, pesticide or chemical sprays.

Reverencing All of Creation

In the book of Genesis, we read that God gave us the earth to care for and cultivate. During planning of the new monastery in the late 1990's, the Sisters, the building committee and the architect shared a common vision of using resources wisely.

Stewardship is a key value of Benedictine monastic life. In the sixth century, St. Benedict wrote that we are to regard all property of the monastery 'utensils and goods' as sacred vessels of the altar (RB:31:10).

When the Sisters relocated from Nauvoo to Rock Island, Prioress Sr. Ruth Ksycki, OSB, shared: "All we have comes from a generous and provident God, and we are to reverence creation and be responsible stewards."

Renewable Energy

For several years, the St. Mary Monastery community explored ways to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels. The "Illinois Solar for All" initiative provides Solar Renewable Energy Credits (SRECs) to eligible Non-Profit Organizations, which made a long-awaited solar project feasible and affordable.

Tri City Electric and Day and Night Solar partnered with the monastery to install two arrays of solar modules on the monastery grounds. One array will send electricity to the monastery to meet up to 98% of the annual electricity needs, and the second array will meet approximately 80% of the needs for Benet House Retreat Center. Between the SRECs and cost savings, the capital outlay of the project will be returned in just a few years.

Jeff Streit, Finance Director at the monastery shared, “We are extremely excited to transition to renewable energy, and feel blessed to collaborate with the partners needed for this investment. This has been a long process, making the project even more rewarding.”

Geothermal

When the community decided to build the Rock Island monastery after 125 years in Nauvoo, the Sisters chose geothermal energy to heat and cool the monastery buildings. Rather than an oil or gas-fired furnace, the monastery is heated and cooled by a geothermal heat pump system.

Underneath the peaceful five-acre lake, energy efficiency is at work. Two miles of polyethylene coils feed the geothermal heating and cooling system. Bob Essary, Director of Maintenance, was part of the team 21 years ago that turned on the first heat pump. “To generate the heat and the cold, no fossil fuels are used,” Bob shared.

LED Lighting

Several years ago, the Sisters purchased light-emitting diode (LED) lighting to replace the standard incandescent bulbs used throughout the monastery. For the monastery grounds and parking lots, LEDs also replaced the high intensity discharge (HID) lamps.

LEDs consume 80-90% less energy than incandescent lights, and the life of a quality LED is estimated to be at least 40,000 hours – or 15 to 20 years of usage.



Creation Care Team

Under the leadership of former Prioress Sr. Sandra Brunenn, the monastery formed a Creation Care team in 2019. The team mission is to promote care of earth at St. Mary Monastery and among the broader community of oblates, volunteers and friends. Along with Sr. Sandra, team members are Sr. Mary Schmidt, monastery employee Bob Essary, and friend Julie Plummer who works with the Iowa Waste Exchange.

Prior to the pandemic, at the suggestion of Linda Clewell, former team member, the monastery initiated a TerraCycle collection program. TerraCycle is a recycling business that runs a volunteer-based program to collect non-recyclable consumer waste that is turned into raw material to be used in new products. Plans on hold due to the pandemic are for a ‘waste sort’ at the monastery and a week-end retreat dedicated to care of the earth.

Today, more than 145 years after their founding, the Benedictine Sisters of St. Mary Monastery continue to intentionally live out the value of Care for Creation in daily ways: conserving natural resources and energy, while recognizing that “the earth is our common home.”*

**cf Laudato Si, Pope Francis, 2015*



Sr. Catherine Cleary and Sr. Catherine Maloney Celebrate 70th Jubilee

During Vespers on March 13, 2021, Sr. Catherine Cleary, OSB, and Sr. Catherine Maloney, OSB, celebrated their 70th jubilee at St. Mary Monastery, Rock Island. Sr. Susan Hutchens, Prioress, spoke about commitment at the celebration:

“We know that community is so much more than merely living under the same roof, sharing space or ministries together. Community is only community if there is also commitment. On this joyful occasion, we celebrate the commitment of Sr. Catherine Cleary and Sr. Catherine Maloney for 70 years - long and strong.”

But it is not just about the “YES” that they made 70 years ago. Today we celebrate the “YES” that each of them has made every single day for the last 25,550 days! This daily commitment reveals most fully the meaning of Conversatio: Fidelity to the Monastic Way of Life.

Every day is a YES to God’s call, and we have been blessed recipients of their YES for 70 years. Today we rejoice, and we express our gratitude to them and to God who directed each of them to our community and supported them along the way to this very day.”

- Sr. Susan Hutchens, Prioress

Sr. Catherine Cleary

Sr. Catherine was born in Peoria, Illinois on June 1, 1930. Her parents, Michael and Clarys gave Catherine and her nine siblings a rich Catholic heritage filled with a love for learning and hard work. Sr. Catherine remembers, “although I loved my family, friends and social life, I heard the voice of God inviting me to enter religious life from a young age.” She entered St. Mary Priory in Nauvoo in the Fall of 1949, and made her final profession August 23, 1954.

After graduating with a bachelor’s degree in biology from St. Scholastica in Duluth, MN, she earned a master’s degree in theology from Saint John’s University in Collegeville, MN, and a master’s degree in educational psychology from the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. She pursued biblical studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

In Illinois, Sr. Catherine taught at St. John’s, Clinton, St. Mary’s, Wenona, the Benedictine Catechetical Center, Ladd, and Alleman High School, Rock Island. She served as campus minister at St. John’s Catholic Newman Center, Champaign, and was involved in parish ministry at St. Thomas the

Apostle, Peoria Heights, and St. Mark's, Peoria. Following two terms as Prioress of St. Mary Monastery in Nauvoo from 1980 to 1988, Sr. Catherine worked as a family therapist from 1989 to 2001, then served as Director of Benet House Retreat Center until 2005. She also served as a Spiritual Director and Director of Oblates.

Her advice to those who are considering a vocation to religious life? "Take the leap of faith, knowing God's love and care is real and beyond whatever you could imagine," she said.

As a member of the Alliance for International Monasticism, Sr. Catherine established the Quad Cities Christian-Muslim Dialogues in 2004.

Sr. Catherine Maloney

Sr. Catherine was born in Estherville, Iowa on May 11, 1931 with her twin sister Nancy Ann Maloney (Gilhooly). Her mother Mildred Truesdell died shortly after their birth, and her father Edward Maloney married again when Catherine was still young. She has a younger half-brother Thomas who lives in Moline, IL.

Sr. Catherine received her bachelor's in education at St. Ambrose College in Davenport, IA, and a master's in education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, IL. She did further studies in theology at St Norbert's College, De Pere, WI.

After moving to Moline in 1941, Sr. Catherine was taught by Benedictine Sisters at St. Mary's School in Moline. "Their virtues of honesty, caring, fairness and their prayer life helped lead me to our Benedictine community, hoping that I might come to be like them," she said. Sr. Catherine remembered the special influences of Sr. Mary Joseph Sepesy, Sr. Clare FitzGerald, and Sr. Imelda Lewis.

A longtime educator in Illinois, Sr. Catherine taught at St. Anthony's School, Atkinson, St. John's School, Clinton, St. Mary's School, Moline, St. Columba, Chicago, Immaculate Conception School,

Monmouth, and Holy Family and St. Boniface schools, Peoria. She also taught at St. Thomas More, Munster, Indiana. Sr. Catherine was a chaplain at Methodist Hospital in Peoria, where she coordinated the Catholic services volunteers. Sr. Catherine served as director of pastoral care at Franciscan Hospital, Rock Island, and she was chaplain for hospice services at Illinois Community Hospital in LaSalle.

Regarding the future of religious life, Sr. Catherine said, "I have hope that communities will continue to serve God in special ministries while being faithful to God's call, 'Come follow me.'"

Following the 70th Jubilee ceremony, the Sisters enjoyed a special celebration dinner with their community.

"Blessed are they who have kept the word with a generous heart and reap a harvest of love through perseverance."

- Luke 8:15



Prioress Susan Hutchens (center) honors Sr. Catherine Cleary (left) and Sr. Catherine Maloney (right) on their 70th Jubilee



A loving moment of gratitude between teacher and student. Cindy Verkler Wade, SMA Class of 1981 with Sr. Veronica in 2006.

Remembering Sister Veronica Shunick, OSB

Sr. Veronica Shunick was a longtime educator in the state of Illinois, and shared her life with the Sisters of St. Mary Monastery for 68 years.

Margaret Ruth Shunick was born February 20, 1923 in Monmouth, IL to Richard and Sadie Shunick. She was one of six children raised mainly by her mother when her father died at the age of 43. Sr. Veronica attended Immaculate Conception Grade School and graduated from Monmouth High School.

Sr. Veronica received her bachelor's degree in education from St. Ambrose College in Davenport, IA and attended the Art Institute of Chicago. She earned a master's degree in Art from the University of Notre Dame. In 1984, Sr. Veronica received a traveling seminar for Humanities and the Arts in Renaissance for six weeks in Italy.

The Benedictine Sisters who taught Margaret made a lasting impact on her life. One teacher that stood out was her 7th and 8th grade teacher, Sister Veronica McKeon, who used a quiet gentleness to encourage young Margaret's growth. Her example strengthened Sr. Veronica's desire to become a teacher.



Sr. Veronica Shunick, OSB

Entering the Benedictine community on Sept. 8, 1941, Sr. Veronica made her first profession on July 29, 1943 and her perpetual profession on July 29, 1946. Her teacher Sister McKeon had died, so Sr. Veronica requested and received her name.

Sr. Veronica served as an educator and administrator of schools. In Illinois she taught at St. Mary's School, Moline, St. Roch's School, LaSalle, St John's, Bradford, Holy Family and St. Boniface

schools, Peoria. She ministered as Community Schools Supervisor for the Sisters of St. Benedict, and as Associate Director of Schools for the Peoria Diocese.

Her longest assignment was at St. Mary's Academy in Nauvoo, where she was an art instructor from 1969 to 1995. She taught all types of art mediums including painting, sculpture, drawing, ceramics, and wood. Her students learned the conventional forms of art, then were allowed the freedom, with guidance, to progress gradually to individual techniques and expressions.

Bloomington Oblate Madeleine Callahan remembers visiting her father's office at Notre Dame. When Madeleine was about six years old, she was mesmerized by a Sister in full habit working on a sculpture near the Art studios. Seeing Madeleine out of the corner of her eye, Sr. Veronica said sternly that if Madeleine remained quiet, she could sit inside the door and watch her work. "I remember studying her face because she was so beautiful," said Madeleine. Decades later when Madeleine visited the monastery, to her enormous surprise, she recognized her "beautiful Sister" and felt it was a sign to get to know the Benedictine community.

Donna (Moore) Conboy graduated from St. Mary's Academy in 1981, and has fond memories of her time in Sr. Veronica's classroom. Donna shared, "Sr. Veronica's art room was a safe place to explore and grow into who we were created to become." Oblate Susan Lawhorn from Macomb, IL remembers Sr. Veronica's smile and quiet spirit, and shared "Sr. Veronica's work speaks for her – the beautiful art and sculptures she created are simply remarkable." Former Prioress Sr. Phyllis said what she learned from Sr. Veronica was to put your all into whatever you were doing. "When she did something, she didn't do it halfway," Sr. Phyllis said with a gentle laugh.



One of Sr. Veronica's many art sculptures

"Sr. Veronica had high expectations of people, but at the same time she gave them a lot of encouragement. Her life exuded joy."

- Sr. Phyllis McMurray, OSB

Sr. Veronica lived the Benedictine values of simplicity and stewardship amidst beauty. Among her legacies is the art and environment which is now enjoyed at the monastery.

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Photo by Sr. Marianne
Burkhard, OSB

Gala Grande

By Sr. Margaret Murphy, OSB

Wind partners with trees,
waltz, ballet, pop disco, hula and fan.
A whirlwind stirs a willow's green skirt
into a spinning hula,
Swishing sound like the brush on a snare drum.
Branches with graceful, uplifted hands
Port de Bras.
Wind billows the red bud into a twirling tutu.
Blustering wind pop discos with the ash,
backward bend and forward bow,
tossing the leafy hair round and round.
Poplar trees line dance,
gusting left, gusting right, stepping in stepping out.
A dancer waves feathery pine fans
inwards and outward, upward and downward.
Breezes swing the dogwood into a waltz.
All curtsy to the hidden light.

*Published in Spirit & Life magazine,
January-February, 2021, Vol. 116:5*

In Memoriam . . .

Alumnæ

Barbara Roman Carper, '59, sister of Sister Marilyn Roman, died April 27, 2021

Susan Johnson Doran, '59, died April 27, 2021

Donna Verbeckmoes Hufeld, '46, died September 12, 2020

Patricia Leonard, '56, died May 21, 2021

James Mackey, partner of Diann M. Kelley, '79, died January 31, 2021

Judith Oberholtzer, mother of Sarah Oberholtzer, '80, died August 25, 2020

James Wegeng, father of Juliana Wegeng Kozik, '82, died April 1, 2021

Family

Joan Marzullo, sister of Sister Rita Cain, died May 3, 2021

Brenda Walsh Noe, sister of Sister Jackie Walsh, died April 18, 2021

Colleen Cleary Regele, sister of Sister Catherine Cleary, died February 14, 2021

Oblates

Sheila Anderson, mother of Bridgette Anderson-Floyd, '91, died April 19, 2021

Diane Hanson, died April 30, 2021

Sr. Denise Vrombaut, OSB, 1933-2021

Sister Denise Vrombaut, OSB, 87, passed away Wednesday March 3, 2021 at the Monastery. Due to COVID protocols, a private Mass of Christian Burial was held Friday, March 5, in the Chapel of St. Mary Monastery. Burial was at Calvary Cemetery, Rock Island.

Donna Marie Vrombaut was born December 30, 1933 in Moline, Illinois, daughter of Peter and Mary DeRycke Vrombaut. She attended St. Mary's School, Moline and graduated from Alleman High School, Rock Island. Sr. Denise entered the Benedictine community on September 1, 1952 and made her final profession as a Benedictine Sister on August 23, 1957. Her ministry included serving at St. Mary Monastery in Food Service, Hospitality as Guest Coordinator, Receptionist and Transportation Director. She also served in the St. Mary's Academy cafeteria as Student Supervisor.

She is survived by her Benedictine Sisters, and nieces and nephews. She was preceded in death by her parents; her brother, John Vrombaut; and her sister, Anna Vrombaut Wilsey.





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

Phone: 309-283-2100

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Compassion, Contemplation and Music: A Retreat Featuring Musician Karen Drucker

Sunday, June 27, 2021

2:00 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.

This afternoon retreat will provide contemplative music and thoughtful reflection on compassion in its various aspects i.e. compassion to self, compassion for creation and more. Enjoy music to lead you into stillness and to enhance your interaction with other individuals who value being a compassionate presence in our world.

Register online at www.smmsisters.org.

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