



# VALUE NOTHING WHATEVER ABOVE CHRIST HIMSELF

A Newsletter for the COMPANIONS OF ST. LUKE / OSB

Eastertide 2017

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*Musings  
by  
the Abbot*

As I write it is the Third Sunday of Easter. Lent as well as the utterly indescribable beauty of the Triduum culminating in the Great Vigil of Easter have passed into history.

I sat down a few days ago to write my thoughts to you, I wondered what I could possibly say about Easter and Eastertide that you haven't all heard before. Then came Saturday, April 29<sup>th</sup>, the feast of St. Catherine of Siena and a light came on.

Catherine was a remarkable woman of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. She was the 25<sup>th</sup> and last child of the Benincasa family. Her father was a dyer of wool, a lower middle class tradesman. In her earliest childhood, she began having visions and at the age of seven she consecrated her virginity to Christ.

She became a Dominican Tertiary when she was 16 and began to live as an anchorite in a small darkened room in her father's house. After three years, still having celestial visions and conversation with Christ, she underwent an experience of "spiritual espousal."

After this she began a ministry to the sick, often those with "repulsive" diseases, and the poor. She began to labor for the conversion of sinners. In the summer of 1370 she had a prolonged series of special manifestations which culminated in a trance-like state during which she heard a divine command to enter public life.

She became a political, social, and ecclesiastical activist. She learned to write (unusual for a 14<sup>th</sup> century woman) and began writing letters to all sorts and stations of people throughout Italy and in the Church, even encouraging Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome from Avignon to begin the reform of the papal states and the clergy. This effort was ultimately successful with the return of Gregory's successor Urban V to Rome.

In short, Catherine spent her life drawing on the energy of communion with God in Christ. Her political and ecclesiastical activism was what made her famous, but it was her ministry to the sick and marginalized that make her a model for the service of God.

Her teaching was that people, whether in the cloister or in the world (or one might even say in a dispersed religious community) must ever abide in the cell of self-knowledge, which is the stable into which the traveler through time to eternity must be born again.

It is this self-knowledge and constant awareness of the presence of God (as we are taught by St. Benedict) that can



Jerusalem

energize us to do good in the world, even under less than encouraging circumstances.

Sam Portaro in “Brightest and Best” puts it this way: “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5) the first letter of John tells us. The darkness of Catherine’s room exists only for those who peer in from the outside, for in that darkness she found God. The darkness beyond the reach of our supposedly enlightened vision—the darkness of sin and death and crime and disease, of lepers and cancers and plagues and prisons--was all light to this weird and wonderful woman.

She walked in the same world as we do, but she saw it differently. She saw it as God’s world, the world of God’s making and God’s redeeming, the God in whom there is no darkness, only light. It is hard to know what to make of a woman like Catherine Benincasa of Siena, but saint will have to do.”

St. Catherine of Siena lived in a politically and socially tumultuous time not unlike our own, where marginalization and bias were widespread. She entered that arena to contend with the forces of social evil and of misfortune and despair among the sick and dispossessed. She used human caring and social activism together to help bring relief to the broken systems and to those on the margins of society. Can she be a model for us as religious in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Benedicite  
Abbot Basil



The Mystical Espousal of Catherine of Siena  
Giovanni di Paolo

## May Convocation

*Sr Martha Lamoy OSB*

May 29-June 3 will see many members of the community gather once again at Conception Abbey in Northwest Missouri for our Spring Convocation. A full week of business will be intertwined with renewal as choral *Opus Dei* and community Eucharist are shared.

Three members, Sister Catherine Ann Ballinger, Brother Anskar Nonken, and Sister Toni Sylvester will profess Annual Vows and two will be clothed as Novices. Two new Postulants will also be received. In addition, one Novice and one Postulant expect to begin formation but formally be transitioned in October.

Our Bishop Visitor, the Right Reverend William Franklin, will preach and celebrate on Tuesday as we commemorate the transferred Feast of our Patron Saint Benedict.

Tuesday also marks the (transferred) celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our Founding in June 1992 with a special prayer at Eucharist and festive meal that evening.

Formal community business will be conducted by Council and Chapter, Mentors and Formation Masters will meet with their charges, and of course there will be plenty of time for rest, renewal and socialization. Anyone not with us is always missed and very much in our prayers.

Sr Martha Lamoy OSB



Conception Abbey

## ***A Living Community***

***Br Robert Cotton OSB***

When I was asked to write about how the Companions of St. Luke, OSB has changed over the years, I was somewhat surprised. After all, it doesn't seem like I have been around that long. Thus, it was even more troubling after reviewing the Directory of Members that Br. David sent out to note that there are only four vowed members who have been members longer than I have! How did that happen?

These revelations have made me consider how like a living being our Community is. It went through infancy, experienced times of growth, experienced sickness and times of despair and decline, made its fair share of mistakes along the way and has matured and become wiser over time. While change has been constant, stability has remained through adherence to our three-fold vows and our belief that nothing is to be preferred over Christ.

Sister Martha and I joined the Community in 2004. We were part of a five people in the Postulant class and I remember arriving at Conception Abbey confused and bewildered and leaving 6 days later exhausted by the nonstop schedule. After its founding in 1991, the Community had years of little or no growth and it was only after its move to Donnellson, Iowa that it began to grow. While I don't remember the exact numbers when I joined, I believe the Community had about 25 members.

At the time, we wore Benedictine crosses on red strings around our necks and we had long black and white rosaries hanging from our belts. Those in simple vows later wore large, heavy white cowls with red piping while those in solemn vows wore the Cuculla at Vespers. We looked quite different than the simple habits of our Catholic brothers.

We used the Monastic Breviary from the Holy Cross Brothers for our offices. Over the years, I can recall at least two other breviaries that our Founder created, the last consisting of two large notebooks weighing in at around 8 pounds!

When we joined, the Founder, was called the Prior and we had a priory located on a remote farm in Donnellson, Iowa. Once we had a sufficient number of solemnly vowed members, the Prior named himself the Abbot and the Priory became the Abbey. Members were expected to support the Abbot and the expenses of the Abbey.

Looking back now, it is clear that at that time virtually all attention in the Community was focused on the Abbot. He led all of the

offices and he sat next to the altar during mass. He directed all discussion, he created the formation materials, handled the finances, made all of the decisions and even directed the cadence at which psalms were to be read. Once he became Abbot he also began wearing a mitre, an embroidered cope and a large gold pectoral cross and ring. There seemed to be an emphasis on form rather than on substance and on control over collaboration.

Tensions arose when the Abbot proposed building a new Abbey on the Donnellson property that would cost over \$2 million. At the time, the Community was in debt and was having difficulty supporting what already existed. Further issues arose when abuse allegations were raised by members who lived at the Abbey.

Fortunately for the Community, the Bishop Visitor and Diocesan Bishop stepped in and while an investigation was ongoing, the Founder resigned and left the Community.

While these were very difficult times for the Community and some members left, we were extremely lucky to have our Chaplain, Father Kamm, appointed by the Bishops as our interim leader. A group of Brothers and Sisters formed a council to assist Father Kamm and we set about rebuilding the Community, rewriting the Constitution and Customary and selling the Donnellson property.

In May of 2010 Sister Martha and I took solemn vows. In October, I had the humbling honor of being elected Abbot. I was fortunate to have strong and diligent Abbot's Councils, Formation Masters and Deans. With their help and that of the Community as a whole we turned CSL into a collaborative group of Companions, led but not dictated to by the Abbot.

Shared responsibility, mutual understanding and focus on love of God and one another now characterizes the Community. We have become something of a model for a Community that was brought to the brink and recovered and other communities in NAECC have modeled provisions in their own Constitutions on ours.

The Community that Abbot Basil now leads is very different than the one I joined in 2004. We have lost and gained members over those years. We have been tested and hardened by the fire and we are stronger in every way than we were then. I feel very fortunate to call each and every one of you my Brothers and Sisters. See you at Convocation!

Peace,  
Br. Robert, OSB





## ***Alleluia's for an Anxious Time***

### ***The Right Reverend William Franklin, Bishop Visitor***



Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

It feels so right in the month since Easter morning to shout over and over again---Alleluia!

To remind ourselves that out of the worst events can come redemption and grace; out of death can come life; out of the agony of Good Friday can come the unfettered joy of Easter

Imagine that you are Mary Magdalene, standing in the garden in the early morning. The tomb is open and it's empty. Is this a bad thing or a good thing?

If you think it means the grave robbers have stolen the body of Jesus, it's a bad thing.

If you think it means that Jesus has been resurrected and he lives, it's a good thing.

Mary had to meet and recognize the resurrected Jesus before she could understand that the empty tomb was not about what we lost--the body of Jesus that she was so desperately seeking---but what we gained: a risen Lord.

Sometimes we need help to see how God uses despair as a doorway into joy.

At the crossing of my cathedral in Buffalo, New York is the place where the body of United States President Millard Fillmore lay in state at his funeral. President Fillmore was a member of the anti-immigration Know-Nothing Party of the 1850's in America. He signed the Fugitive Slave act what allowed U.S. government agents to round up escaped slaves in the northern states and send them back to their owners and masters in the southern states for certain flogging or even lynching.

On this very spot of the funeral site of a man who did so much to harm Africans and African-Americans is the exact place where Michael Curry was ordained a deacon in 1979. Michael Curry, this son of the Rector of St. Philip's Church in Buffalo, a historic African-American congregation of The Episcopal Church, has

become the first African-American Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church. On March 5, the Most Rev. Michael Curry preached a joyous sermon again on this very site to mark my cathedral's 200th anniversary.

God has a great sense of humor. Alleluia!

On April 15, at the Great Vigil of Easter we all prayed this prayer:

***O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen***

That prayer has been a great source of comfort to me since Easter---and I hope to you---during these anxious times. It reminds me that God is in charge, and we are not seeing the full picture now.

Regardless of how you voted in the recent American presidential election, or wherever you are during this Easter season on our planet Earth, I think we are all concerned about the disarray and confusion we see in Washington, D.C., in London, in Paris, in Cairo, in Seoul, and other capitals of the world.

Some days it is hard to have confidence in the decisions that are being made, or the people who are making them. There is hate and heat where we seek love and light, anger rather than amity, revenge rather than reason.

The good we can draw from this is that we are called as people of both prayer and work, of a Benedictine Monastic Movement, of the Companions of St. Luke of the Order of St. Benedict, as people of faith, to assert ourselves more strongly now than we have ever done before since the foundation of the Companions.

We are called to act as monastics on behalf of immigrants, the homeless, people of color, gay and lesbian people, the sick, the elderly. This is a wake-up call for us, as we prepare to gather for our upcoming Convocation. How loud does opportunity have to knock to invite us to do the work of the Kingdom of God?

On Easter Sunday, at 1:15 pm, when I walked out of my cathedral, I underwent my own "resurrection." I became a bishop on sabbatical.

I am spending the next four months focusing on the future of the Church and deciding how to spend the most fruitful part of my episcopate when I return in late August. And yes, I will be back!

In these weeks ahead as we approach and experience Convocation together, I, on my sabbatical, and you as a monastic community, will be pondering what needs to be raised up and what needs to be made new.

I ask for your prayers as I engage in that work, and you will be in mine as you do the same, and we will be joining together in the actuality of prayer in a community of one another when we gather at Conception Abbey on May 29.

Now, in the meantime, rejoice in the risen Lord. Rejoice in the opportunity to walk through the door from doom to joy, to recognize that an empty tomb tells us not what we have lost, but what we have gained.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Bishop Bill



## ***What are we up to? An island and not an island Sr Susanna Margaret Fronzuto OSB***

Fog creeps in on little cat's feet blanketing the island with a swirling gray mist evoking feelings similar to that of a well worn shawl draped around the shoulders on a chilly day. It is a reminder to slow down while moving about as well as a time for travellers to cast a suspicious eye to the sky.



Life on an island 14 miles long and 5 miles wide presents some unique challenges. Always at the whim of Mother Nature, you have to keep an eye to the weather when traveling to or from "America" as we locals call it. When the winds blow and the seas rage, transportation in either direction grinds to a halt; no newspapers, no food trucks, no mail, no medical transport except Boston Medflight- a pricey way to get a helicopter ride to the closest major hospital.

Stranded off-island, you scramble to find a hotel room for the night, while rearranging your work schedule and child care. Conversely, not being able to leave the island as expected means cancelled doctor's appointments, missed weddings and vacation plans or business trips that are temporarily derailed.

This little island of Nantucket I call home and indeed I carry it in my heart wherever I go, much like the monastery of the heart where my brothers and sisters dwell. This long spit of land sitting 30 miles at sea is home to a year round population of 15,000 people that swells to 60,000 inhabitants during the busy summer months.

My life here is rather ordinary with a family, a full-time job, a part-time job, volunteer commitments and an active parish ministry. It seems as if I am never alone. Yet I feel the pangs of physical and spiritual separation from my brothers and sisters who I see only once a year. How do I maintain relationships in a dispersed community? Separated by time and space there are no bells besides the Town Clock pealing loudly every hour and 52 times at seven am, noon and nine pm, to summon me to prayer. I read the Divine Office alone. Instead of embracing solitude, I am often chasing the peace and quiet time with God that at the same time I so earnestly seek.

Each morning I waken long before the sun has creased the sky and give thanks to God for the gift of another day. My music room is

my cell. Bookcases line the walls, a ballet barre, African drums, a massage table, my beloved harp, and tucked away in a corner, my altar.

Once the barnyard animals have been fed I retreat to my cell and begin the day by reading the Daily Office. I read aloud so that I don't rush or find my attention drifting unexpectedly with schedules and the daily to-do list. I must discipline myself; there is no slow, steady cadence of the monastic day where everything is planned and orderly nor is there anyone to admonish me for not fulfilling my vows of stability and conversion of life. When my steps are unsteady and my resolve on shaky ground, there is no one besides my God to share the dark night of the soul.

John Donne wrote the poem "No Man is an Island" with the opening lines 'No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.....' I hold those words dear, for the brothers and sisters I know well, those I would like to get to know and those whom I have not yet met, for though a dispersed community if I but hold you in my heart we are together and stronger for it.

Sr Sunanna Margaret OSB

### ***The Far Beyond: Monte Cassino to CSL Br Gregory n/OSB***



Where did my Benedictine journey begin, and can I in fact ascribe it to a specific event? Yes, and it began on top of Monte Cassino, in Italy.

My constant companion since I came down from that mountain

has been the RULE, purchased for me on that occasion by my wife Michiko. Next to *Star Wars* meets Kansas City Airport (more later), her serendipitous purchase of the RULE is my favorite story of my Benedictine journey. How could she know.

Of my Benedictine Genesis I wrote, "*I started the RULE on 22 November 2014, having just purchased it at Monte Cassino. I completed it, heavily marked up, on 23 March 2015, the day I was interviewed by Abbot Robert.*"

Thirty months later I 'realize I have come far. But I also realize that the trajectory I am on will likely continue, and makes me look forward to what that progress might look like after an additional year in the CSL Novitiate program."

The path to today goes like this:

**GENESIS:** By my first CSL Convocation in May of 2015, I had read the RULE a couple of times, and de Waal's *Seeking God*. But that first week was completely overwhelming. I couldn't follow the TEC liturgy; I was writing an *in absentia* eulogy for a lifelong friend who died the day before Convocation; and my head was spinning from the dizzying schedule. The saving grace was an interview with Bishop Bill. He provided context and a long term view. And, inadvertently led me to discern my path was as a Postulant. I remember well the look of panic on my mentor's face when I brought this up on the last day. Thank you for your patience, Br Dunstan!

### ***THE FAR BEYOND – 4 OBI-WAN KENOBI'S***

With the exhaustion of my first Convocation behind me, joining Abbot Basil in Seattle for his St Benedict's Feast Day homily moved me quickly beyond beginnings, with the Abbot painting a picture of a far off, appealing, promised land.

The word 'contemplative' especially stuck in my mind. I expect everyone remembers the voyage of discovery the first year represents. All was so new. At the end of the first year, even something as seemingly simple as application for the Novitiate seemed overwhelming (thank you Br. Stephen Francis).

It seemed to start coming together during our Clothing in May 2016. A big part was being part of a cohort of 8, a mini-community within a community, all going through the same growing joys and challenges.

At about the same time, I became increasingly aware of a second



community within the larger community; those of us from the far beyond who had the shared experience of struggling to keep from being lost in the liturgy. Early on, three of us made connections, as can be seen in the picture taken in front of Hokusai *Waves* print .

(We bonded further when we realized we could use our three locations to memorize the initials on the OSB cross, in a somewhat irreverent fashion; CSPB became 'C' for Canada, 'SP' for Sao Paulo, and 'B' for Britain.)

A further bond for the five of us from the far beyond actually happened at the airport after Convocation.

When I got home I wrote to my Sisters:

"After saying goodbye to the four of you, I was sitting in a quiet corner opposite four security guards enjoying their break. After a couple of minutes, a big burly guy came over and started to brief them. I didn't pay much attention until I latched onto some words



*that he was repeating. 'Black outfits.' 'Women in black.' 'You better keep an eye out for them.'*

*He was gone before I realized that he was talking about the four of you in the picture above. As soon as I realized what was going on, I reassured the four security guards that you were Sisters, Benedictines, and that I was with you. They all smiled and seemed to understand. And I assume the four of you never knew that you were being 'habit' profiled!*

*Funniest part of the sequence for me was just before the big burly guard left he invoked Star Wars, and said that you looked like Obi Wan Kenobi, and that he half expected you to be hiding light sabres under your habits. It was very hard not to burst out laughing!!"*

### **A LIVING LAB – WESTMINSTER ABBEY (No, not THAT one)**

After that the really intensive work began. I was still shy. Other than with my fellow trustees at church, I kept my Benedictine journey to myself. That journey, however, really began in earnest in July 2016, when I went on a 3-day retreat to Westminster Abbey near Vancouver. I had been there a few times as an afternoon visitor, but never really noticed that it was a Benedictine Abbey.

My first retreat was as overwhelming and exhilarating as my first CSL Convocation. Much of the exhilaration that came from the fact that 90% of the liturgy was chanted, and the RULE was read out daily during our conversation-free lunches; I would read it in the morning, and then hear the same segment read out over lunch.

I have come to realize that my time at the Abbey has markedly influenced my formation. Everything I read and reflect upon there I see/feel/sense in an absolutely indelible way. I never want to forget how nourishing & how productive these times are.

### **THIS IS WHO I AM**

I was shy about going public. Partly it was because I didn't (yet?) want to draw attention to this embryonic aspect of myself. But, mostly, I think, it meant I wasn't ready in me where I could come out to say publicly without reservation *"this is who I am."*

By degrees I started to wear my habit, with my priest's encouragement, when I led Evening Prayer. I did the same during a Christmas homily. At Church Committee I explained what it meant. Several of them quite enjoyed the novelty of calling me Brother Gregory! And a major article I wrote for our Diocesan newspaper will appear under the by-line Br Gregory n/OSB. I'm definitely 'out' now as a Benedictine!

It seems a long way from that bewildering first Convocation, and I am so grateful that the road from Monte Cassino led me to this nurturing CSL Community and to my *Star Wars* Sisters from the far beyond!

Br Gregory n/OSB



CSL Jedi Sisters from galaxies far far away!

From Sr Alison Joy OSB

The Church Times has a small column on the back page called "Word from Wormingford" on this Lesser Feast of Pachomius a "Word from Glasgow"!

Pachomius C.298-348, one of the early desert Monks who introduced the cenobitic life is commemorated on 15 May (in C of E Lectionary). From 'The Sayings of the Desert Fathers':

*'Abba Psenhaisius, Abba Surus, and Abba Psoius used to agree in saying this, "Whenever we listened to the words of our Father, Abba Pachomius, we were greatly helped and spurred on with zeal for good works; we saw how, even when he kept silence, he taught us by his actions. We were amazed by him and we used to say to each other, 'We thought that all the saints were created as saints by God and never changed from their mother's womb, not like other men. We thought that sinners could not live devoutly, because they had been so created. But now we see the goodness of God manifested in our father, for see, he is of pagan origin and he has become devout; he has put on all the commandments of God. Thus even we also can follow him and become equal to the saints whom he himself has followed."*

*translated Sr Benedicta Ward SLG*