

# **Reflections on Benedictine Religious Life in the Modern World**



**By Brothers and Sisters of  
The Companions of St. Luke**

# Reflections on Benedictine Religious Life in the Modern World

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<p>Website: <a href="http://www.csl-osb.org">http://www.csl-osb.org</a> Opus Dei: <a href="http://benedictineprayers.org">http://benedictineprayers.org</a>  E-mail: <a href="mailto:csl91.membership@gmail.com">csl91.membership@gmail.com</a></p> <p>© Copyright 2024 by The Companions of St. Luke. The content of this document may not be duplicated or electronically copied without prior written permission from The Companions of St. Luke (CSL). All Rights Reserved.</p>	

## Welcome

You are invited to read this little booklet because you contacted The Companions of St. Luke (CSL) to explore a possible call to Benedictine life. Or, you may have already joined us as members and want to support both those who are searching for a spiritual community with us *as well* as those who are seeking meaning in life and may just be curious about who we are. In any case, Welcome!

As a dispersed Episcopal Benedictine community, Companions may be found from coast to coast and from North to South America. You may be familiar with religious orders or Christian communities in the Protestant (including Episcopal), Catholic, or Orthodox churches. These orders or communities may be related, for example, to Benedictine, Franciscan, or Dominican ways of life. No matter what their Rule of Life may be, traditionally members of religious orders have lived together in a monastery and may have ministries related to healing prayer, contemplative living, preaching, teaching, or service.

As a Benedictine community without a monastery, we live into the *Rule of St. Benedict* in a different way. We express it as living in “a monastery of the heart.” What that means is that we practice daily prayer, meditation, and holy reading at home or at work on a schedule that each member sets. This requires a level of personal discipline that takes time to develop. But the result is that our life is more God centered and our work, no matter what kind of work it is, is respected and celebrated as a gift of God.

The reflections in this booklet are offered by our members as personal insights on how we are trying to live into being a part of a monastery of the heart. It is hoped that this effort will provide some information and insight about who we are, what it means to live and work in the world as Benedictines, and assist you in your discernment of God’s call.

Peace,

*The Companions of St. Luke*



## The Companions of St. Luke, OSB, and the Greater Church

*By The Right Reverend Alan Scarfe, CSL Bishop Visitor*



There is in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, an image that sticks in my mind. It is of an angel flying in the heaven carrying “the eternal Gospel.” It’s a strange image, I suppose, and yet it symbolized for the writer of Revelation, John, the gift of endless hope at a time of intense persecution of the young Christian community under Roman times. Everything then known as central to the establishment of faith was disappearing, including the center for Jewish and Christian religion, Jerusalem, with its sacred Temple; and the people who had begun to follow the new Way of Jesus of Nazareth were left to fend for themselves, or so it seemed. At such a time, John had his vision of the eternal Gospel. God’s good news to humanity would continue to be proclaimed, believed and lived out. That two thousand years later, here we are, still seekers after that good news, people whose inner self tells them that God is real, and worthy of exploration for connection or relationship, and our ardor is evidence of this.

In one of the Eucharistic Prayers of The Episcopal Church, we pray for “all those who seek Your (God’s) truth.” Does that include you? Polls tell us that many are “hungering for a deeper relationship with God”. And we are realizing that satisfying such a hunger need not be a lonely journey. The Archbishop of Canterbury, promoting life in community, wrote: “Prayer can be difficult on your own. Actually, being a Christian is pretty hard on your own. That’s why Christians have always gathered together – to encourage each other, learn together, and share their lives together.”

Over the last couple of years, we have all experienced a lot of alone time. The impact of the pandemic lives with us. With a death toll in the United States alone of more than a million people from COVID, there are few of us untouched by the pandemic. I reflected on this while in London in 2022, as I wrote a friend’s name upon the COVID deaths’ remembrance wall along the Thames embankment. She was the first female Anglican bishop in Africa, and had been invited to preach at the inaugural service of the upcoming Lambeth Conference at which every active Bishop in the Anglican Communion gathers. And she was a close friend and the bishop of our companion diocese in Swaziland (now Eswatini). COVID was no respecter of persons; and continues to afflict people who suffer from long COVID.

Nations and their economies are still adjusting; the concept of a hybrid work life, and even a hybrid church life, has come into existence; and it is clear that some things will never return to their old ways. It could be argued that our difficulty in resisting the tendency to sharp polarization is another consequence, though I suspect much of that comes from the new ways of communicating in the digital age. The Church in the

western hemisphere has not bounced back, especially among young families. And the Church has been assessing its mandate to reconcile people with God, and its methods of fulfilling it. This is a time for self-reflection as individuals and as organizations, and a time to assess our capacity for self-sustenance and adaptability to change. The Great Commission of Jesus remains – to go and proclaim the good news of God’s love, and to make disciples. And we are reminded that many generations have faced their own experiences of devastation, societal collapse, and the consistent challenge of the deep prayerful discernment of God’s ongoing will. The eternal Gospel remains an offer for us, and we are invited to pray mindfully as to how we will respond.

This is not a way of life we need to undertake alone. In fact, we are capable of considering our need for each other especially in the development of our spiritual life. For centuries, the eternal Gospel, God’s good news of love, has been carried forward by people who intentionally gathered in community to grow spiritually together. We call them monastic communities. Historically when the world has passed through turmoil and devastation, people have preserved our faith by coming together in community. That tradition continues today, within The Episcopal Church. And one particular order, The Companions of St Luke (CSL), carries this out in a context that closely suits contemporary conditions. The community is founded on the *Rule of St. Benedict*, as a monastic order, and yet it is a dispersed community, not gathered in one place. Its members grow in spirituality together while living across the country, and while involved in numerous local parishes or congregations. They offer a contemporary form of communal spirituality suited for the global, interconnected society in which we live. As such, it is accessible as a community, while being rooted in the ancient traditions of Christian life and worship. Organized in 1992, under the authorization of the Bishop of Chicago, Frank Griswold, it is a 21<sup>st</sup> century vehicle of the eternal Gospel. It offers a contemporary form of spirituality speaking to present generations and our needs and concerns.

Dwight Zscheile, an Episcopalian theologian and Church developer, calls for an agile Church for an age such as ours. He emphasizes a Church focused on its finding where God is at work beyond its walls, and being committed to partnering with God in that work. These actions of evangelism, compassion, social justice, healing and reconciliation, and hospitality are central to our faith, and yet are to be carried out by a Church with porous boundaries. CSL, in being a dispersed community yet framing life in an ancient rhythm of prayer and service, and being influenced by the social consciousness of the Evangelist Luke, provides such a supporting role within a Church seeking to be nimble and agile and continuing to proclaim the eternal Gospel. We are shaped to live and serve in this way; and so I invite you to learn more about CSL, an Order of St. Benedict. You can find us on all the major social media platforms, where you can read up on the Benedictine religious life being explored and lived out for our time.

## The Companions of St. Luke as a Community

By Sr. Catherine Ann Ballinger, OSB<sup>+</sup>

The Oxford Dictionary defines "community" as: "A group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common." It makes a further refinement: "The condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common."



In short, the word "community" conveys a sense of belonging, a way of relating oneself to others. According to the first definition, it would seem each of us belongs to multiple communities, by accident, before we were born. For instance, my father's family links me to the French Huguenots and the Pioneers of the Midwest, while my mother connects me to the Spanish Conquistadores. I grew up on Eisenhower Street in San Mateo, California, and my address determined I would go to Parkside Elementary, Bayside Middle, and Aragon High Schools. My address also defined the parish to which we belonged and where we would worship, as well as the polling place where my parents, and eventually I, would vote. These are communities of happenstance, existing simply because I was born into a particular family or lived on a certain street, no questions asked—you belong.

These "accidental communities" of my birth and young adulthood laid the basis for a common experience of time and place but were not the whole of them, as I suspect is true for many of you. For I may indeed have been born with brown hair, but have no more an affiliation with the "Community of Brunettes" than idle curiosity regarding the distinction between chestnut and auburn. I recently learned my French Huguenot ancestors made it to the Colony of Virginia in the 17th century, but I have little motivation to assert any "First Family" roots. Rather, it seems as we grow and mature, the second aspect of "community", that of "common interest" takes shape, determining how and with whom we spend our time, creating intersecting layers of belonging. What we study at university drives association with particular sets of people and not with others. It may lead in turn toward where and for whom we work, the book groups we join, the type of yoga we practice, even the foods we choose to eat. In short, how we journey through and experience life is shaped by the communities to which we choose to belong, and they in turn may be shaped by the experiences we gather on the way.

The Companions of St. Luke manifests both these characteristics, that of birth and that of choice, yet is ever so much more, transcending time and space and self. For God has called us each by name before we were conceived. He is our Father from the beginning of time through the end of time. He has claimed us for his own and we were born into that rich heritage—it is ours for the taking. We who are Companions have chosen to respond to his call of love in a particular way, by allowing the *Rule of*

*St. Benedict* to govern how we live and interact with the rest of His Creation. Far more than an "interest group" to which we may belong for a time and a season, or a neighborhood we may one day leave, the *Rule* is a pilgrimage of the soul, a way of relating to and being at peace with the world, at one with God. And while dispersed, we are not without guidance and support, for we journey onward steadied by the prayers and supplications of our fellow pilgrims, the Companions who have trod the very same path before us and those who now travel alongside. We draw sustenance for our pilgrimage through our twice-yearly Convocations, and other gatherings as may be practicable.

"Come and see" said Philip to his brother Nathaniel. "We have found the Lord." Come and see...and walk with us.

## Living under a “Rule of Life”

By Sr. Jana Lynn Whitworth, OSB<sup>+</sup>



For any activity or project, it is important to know what the core mission is. What is the highest value? Everything else can be understood by its relationship to this highest value. *The Rule of St. Benedict* works for me as a guiding document because it defines a way of living that ‘prefers nothing to Christ.’ The details of life may have shifted in the hundreds of years since the rule was written but that highest value still works. Life in a dispersed community in the twenty first century is certainly much different from Benedict’s monastery, but people are essentially the same.

I read the rule and recognize its wisdom for my life.

The rule creates a familiar rhythm of prayer and work that can be adapted to any environment. Far from being rigid, it is filled with flexibility and grace. It assumes that sometimes people will be late, will be tired or sick or discouraged. Far from a zero-tolerance policy it values every soul and provides for variations in temperament, inclination, even dietary choices. It encourages a communal adherence to particular habits because people are often more successful with community support. It suggests that if we attend to serving God and other people in the details, the big picture will naturally fall into place.

The rule creates a rhythm of life that includes regular daily time for prayer. As Episcopalians we sign no confession of faith; instead we participate in prayer and worship because our tradition holds that we believe what we pray. Over time, the prayers, some of which have been passed down through generations, help to form our spiritual life. The daily office encourages spending time with all of scripture. It especially invites the psalter to become ingrained. The psalter contains a wide range of human emotion and circumstance and is a welcome reminder that I can come to God imperfect, frazzled, even sad or angry. There is no requirement that I be fully formed or have my act together. It is enough to be willing to set intentions and devote the time to them. The rule is clear that people will be imperfect and need correction, and that guidance must take into account the individual.

Encountering scripture in the daily office and in formation, I have read much more broadly than I might have otherwise. Wrestling with passages from scripture that are less familiar or intuitive has been a blessing. I have a more complete picture, and a willingness to spend time listening, which is Benedict’s first instruction. Listen. Listen and attend to the message you hear. Obedience at its root is this practice of first listening, and then behaving accordingly. Allowing a focus on Christ to question each choice has helped create a clear guiding ethic. This greatly simplifies the choices I make. No single task is too small to be done in faith. I especially like the way the rule encourages a faithful approach to personal property. Acquiring and holding on to



things can be a real drain on my energy, and letting them go and choosing to have fewer things but to care for them faithfully has given me back time and energy and this feels freeing.

The daily offices also serve as a kind of “reset” in the day. Life is busy enough that it is easy for the urgent to chase out the important. I am also tempted to want to have something to show for my time. This makes time for prayer a challenge since it does not check anything off my to do list: in the moment it is not all that visible an accomplishment. With time the rhythms of prayer have seeped into my life and they make a difference which is noticeable if hard to quantify. Even on a day where I miss an office and my routines get broken, I still have an underlying sense of having rooted my life in Christ. I have learned that the less willing I am to stop and pray the more glad I will be afterward that I did. Knowing that others worldwide share in these same routines of prayer is encouraging. Having brothers and sisters on the same journey has given me people to compare notes and share experiences with. Formation has included a wide variety of voices that can speak into my experience and broaden it with a slightly different perspective, and has also meant I have conversation partners who have read some of the same books, and formation guides who can ask me about my readings, and about my journey. This particular structured and clear approach to living into my baptism has turned out to be helpful even when it has been challenging and I am grateful for the journey.

# The Monastery of the Heart: Living as a Benedictine in Dispersion

*By Br. Robert Cotton, OSB*

Some may wonder about the notion of how it is possible to live as a Benedictine monastic in a Community where there is no physical monastery and the members of the Community are spread across continents, oceans, time zones and nations. Isn't it true that St. Benedict warned against beginners attempting to live monastic life as a solitaire and believed that the ideal environment for a monastic vocation to flourish is in a monastery community? How can you be a Benedictine and not live in a monastery? Is this authentic?



These were among the many questions that I asked and considered over fifteen years ago as I contemplated seeking a monastic vocation as a member of The Companions of St. Luke, OSB (CSL). It is also a question that has been asked of me by inquirers and those who are just curious since I started on this journey. The whole purpose of seeking to become a monastic is to seek closer union with God. As St. Benedict said, "We are to prefer nothing to Christ." Monasticism is not a desire to live in a walled community or to seek to escape from the world. Rather, we are to live in the world but to always keep God as the center of our lives.

Benedict placed such an emphasis on the monastery and living in community with like seekers because, as he said, he wished to establish a "school for beginners". He knew that we could only succeed in our quest for closer union with God through the grace of the Holy Spirit and the help of our fellow monastics. He recognized that there are many stumbling blocks, false byways and frustrating, arid sections on the narrow path towards the Lord. We can only hope to overcome these through the prayers, help, and guidance of those who share our goal and travel the path with us. Even after having taken Solemn (Life) Vows and having had the honor to serve as the Abbot of The Companions of St. Luke, OSB, for five years, I know that I am still very much a beginner on the journey towards Christ and I very much need the support and prayers of my fellow travelers.

I have come to learn that it is not the walls of the cloister that make a monastery. It is the sinners, saints and people like you and me that make up the Community, guided by the Holy Spirit, that make the monastery. I have also learned that physical proximity alone does not form a monastic community. If there isn't honest communication; if there isn't sincere caring; if there is too much form over substance; or, if there is misplaced pride or harsh judgment, how closely you live to one another won't matter and the path to God will become steep indeed.

The fact is that the world is very much changed since Benedict created his monastic model. That is not to say that the goals he created or the insights he offered are any

less valid than they were in the 600s. At the time he was writing, the only way people could learn from one another, provide support or seek guidance was if they were co-located. Books were few, travel was difficult and there was no phone or internet. Obviously, that has all changed and it is now possible for members of CSL to be in near instant communication with each other even if we are widely separated by space. It is this communication that allows Formation Guides to assist and shepherd postulants and novices, that allows us to pray together and that helps us to become a truly caring Christian family, helping each other to find God.

All of this is not to say that it is easy. We miss seeing each other and we miss the camaraderie and interaction that only face-to-face meeting can bring. We miss the opportunity for communal worship with those we care about. Therefore, it is important to us to come in from the Diaspora twice a year at Convocation to renew our relationships and strengthen our bonds. I always leave our Convocation gatherings exhausted but recharged in my Faith and my love for our Community—just as Benedict would want it!

We are fond in The Companions of St. Luke, OSB, of saying that we carry the monastery in our heart. It is in our hearts that we learn to hold Christ above all else. It is in our hearts that our yearnings for closer union with God reside. And, it is in our hearts that our help and caring for each other comes to fruition. We might be dispersed but we are together in our love for God and one another.

## Opus Dei: Prayer and Contemplation

By Sr. Anna Grace Madden, OSB

*Opus Dei* is a Latin term literally translated as “The Work of God”. Also known as The Daily Office, The Divine Office, or Liturgy of the Hours, this is the cycle of prayers that have been offered by Benedictines every day for the past 1,500 years. The word “office” comes from the same root as “offering.” At any given moment, somewhere in the world Benedictines are offering prayers to God according to the traditions of our spiritual heritage.



The Psalms of David provide the framework for our prayers. The words of the Psalter have been in liturgical use since they were composed. A marvelous aspect of the Psalms is that we are permitted to participate in them with the Poet who is the Holy Spirit and the countless souls who have prayed them from antiquity. Psalm 119:164 proclaims, “Seven times a day do I praise you, because of your righteous judgments.” Based on this Scripture, Saint Benedict prescribed seven fixed times or “hours” of the day for his monks to gather for prayer in the oratory of the monastery. Along with selections from the Psalter, Saint Benedict’s instructions included the use of antiphons, hymns, canticles and readings from Scripture for the various hours. All 150 Psalms were prayed in the course of a week according to the schedule he suggested for the Hours of Matins (Morning Prayer), Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers (Evening Prayer), and Compline. In current usage, many religious communities – including The Companions of St. Luke – have combined the “Little Hours” of Prime, Terce, Sext and None into the single office of Diurnum, or Noonday Prayer. Depending on the breviary (prayer book) used, the Psalms are generally prayed in their entirety on a two- or four-week cycle.

When we are gathered together in community, The Companions of St. Luke (CSL) pray the Offices using the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. We have the latitude to use other breviaries in our own homes. Many of us use the online CSL version of St. Bede’s Breviary which may be accessed by link on our website. Some of the others we use are *Benedictine Daily Prayer*, *The Glenstal Book of Prayer*, *The Liturgy of the Hours*, and *The Monastic Diurnal Revised*.

Praying the Office at the appointed times each day requires dedication and discipline. As Saint Benedict states in our Holy Rule, “*Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God (RB 1980 43:3)*.” In this age of multi-tasking, it can seem a foreign concept to set aside whatever we are doing to pray at the appointed times. Is it asking so much to give God our full attention by allotting times for nothing more? Father Michael Casey says it eloquently: “Time given to God is time withdrawn from other activities. Time given to God is time not available for self.”

Alongside the *Opus Dei*, contemplative prayer is an essential element of Benedictine life. Where the *Opus Dei* is formally structured, the shape of contemplative prayer is numinous.

*The Rule of Saint Benedict* sets time aside each day for the practice of *lectio divina* (sacred reading), which is one avenue to contemplative prayer. For descriptive purposes, *Lectio* is divided into a four-step process:

- *Lectio* – We slowly and intentionally read a portion of Scripture or other Christian writing.
- *Meditatio* – We ponder a portion of the passage in our heart, following the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary (*Luke 2:29*).
- *Oratio* – We enter into conversation with God concerning the passage and the insights we have been given.
- *Contemplatio* – We simply and silently rest in God's presence.

Recent models of *lectio* add a fifth step, *actio* – applying the insights we have received through *lectio* into our daily lives. In our actual practice of *lectio* we follow where the Holy Spirit leads. The steps may fall in a different order and some may be skipped entirely.

These are but two of the different means we employ to seek conscious contact with the Holy as we aspire to pray unceasingly. Just as surely as we experience communal prayer through the Offices and personal prayer through contemplation and intercession, we can also experience prayer intellectually through study; creatively through various art forms; and even in our daily tasks like preparing a meal or weeding the garden. Just as our bodies need a variety of nutrients to thrive, so do our souls.

## Opus Dei: Benedictine Study

By Abbess Martha Lamoy, OSB<sup>+</sup>



In the *Rule*, Benedict tells his monks that there should be time set aside for a variety of tasks: community and individual prayer, the work of the monastery (*i.e.*, those tasks required to earn a living and maintain the household), and personal spiritual reading and study. Two of the questions I'm frequently asked by friends who want to know more about my life as a religious and a member of The Companions of St. Luke (CSL) are what types of materials do I study and, now that I've made my Life Vows, am I working on anything? Along with *what* am I doing comes the follow-up question, *why*? Hopefully this reflection will provide an answer.

In my nearly twenty years in the community, particularly the past ten plus since my Solemn Profession, my study has taken on a variety of forms depending on what I feel called to do. It's important to note that when I say "study" I don't necessarily mean it in the academic sense. Benedictine study is deeper, more thoughtful and intentional. That doesn't mean I don't look at some things from an academic perspective, but it does mean that I go a step further.

With that in mind let me try to explain some of the ways I study as a Benedictine and a Monastic. First, my study encompasses my daily prayer. Particularly with my morning prayer I will try to find a word or phrase in one of the Psalms or scripture readings that strikes a chord. When I do, this passage becomes the basis of the monastic practice of *Lectio Divina*, or "sacred reading", a time of sitting with a few words or lines and reflecting on and praying about what they mean in my life. I then take this with me during the day. Sometimes what I've chosen changes depending on the selections of Psalms for Noon Prayer. Other times the same phrase resounds with me all afternoon and evening. Most recently, as a newly ordained priest in The Episcopal Church responsible for three small congregations in Southeast Kansas, my *Lectio Divina* has expanded to include reflection on the weekly readings as I prepare sermons.

In addition to what I find in scripture, I also study Benedict's Rule. Besides the document itself, I also read what others have written about it. These various commentaries help me to understand the material and gain a new perspective on it. Other favorite topics include almost anything on monasticism in general, including works by those who influenced Benedict. I'm often asked where I find my reading material. One resource is the reading list the community put together for those in formation. Two and a half years in initial formation wasn't nearly enough time to read everything that looked interesting, so I'll frequently return to the list for something new. Another resource is the books themselves. One author refers to another, who refers to another and so on. The reference lists and footnotes I find in one book direct

me to additional study. My Brothers and Sisters suggest books they have found. I read books about topics relevant to the Episcopal or Anglican churches, or to Christianity in general. Prior to my ordination as a priest, I held a secular job in the training industry, so I read books relevant to that profession. And of course, there's always the tried-and-true method of browsing shelves of the library or bookstore!

This leads to the second question I get asked frequently, about what I'm doing now that I've made Life Profession, and why I would continually want to revisit similar topics. Several years ago, I graduated from The Episcopal Church's Education for Ministry. I was fortunate enough to be in the first class of EFM's redesigned program that included secular books and textbooks in addition to program-specific study materials. Exposure to this type of theological education was extremely useful when I entered seminary a couple of years later. Being a part of EFM – then and now – helps keep me grounded in the people I serve in my parish and the community.

Spiritually, I continue to read and learn about Chapter 7 of the *Rule*, which speaks of Humility, and was one of my topics of study during my period of Annual Profession. Much as with the suggested reading list during early formation, several books were recommended for this study, and I couldn't read them all. I am also involved in the Episcopal Cursillo Ministry in my area; Cursillo's three-pronged approach of Piety, Study and Action correlates well for me with the Benedictine Vows of Stability, Obedience and Fidelity to Monastic Life (often referred to as Conversion of Life). As Superior, while I don't support any single member in formation, I have the honor of interacting with each of them as a spiritual and administrative guide. Even so, I will periodically read the same material some of them have chosen so I remain up to date on the topics of interest to the community.

One of the primary reasons I continue to read and study is because, for me, being a monastic and, in particular, a member of CSL is a lifelong journey. For me to continue to grow and progress along the journey, I have to continue to put something into it. That "something" for me is enrichment and learning, finding material that gives new perspectives on what it means to be part of a religious community in the 21st Century and beyond, particularly part of a dispersed community like CSL. In addition, being Benedictine and monastic calls me to a conversion of life. For me, part of this conversion is a need to stretch and grow. The only way I can do this is to continue to learn. But ultimately, regardless of the reasons why study is important, or whether the material is scriptural, theological, or secular in nature, the architect behind it all is God. I try to think about what God's Will is for me and to make sure what I do and study are for the right reasons.

## Monastic Spirituality and Social Justice Ministry

*Br. Raymond Escott, OSB+*

For the longest time, I had a vision that there were distinct differences between monastic/contemplative spirituality and active social justice ministry. I suppose my vision came from my reading of monastic life, including the life of monks and nuns living in the monasteries and convents. It was not until I encountered the *Rule of St. Benedict* that I finally realized that the two were one and the same. But how can that be? Can one be called to the monastic life and to the life of active ministry at the same time? There are differences but, in my case, the answer was yes.



As a Deacon, my work and ministry over the last fifteen plus years has been related to working with the poor, the sick, the lonely, the homeless, and those with various abilities. My call is to be a bridge between the church and the world, bringing the needs of the world to church and the church to the world. My role as a Chaplain brought me up close with those who struggle with alcoholism, drug addiction, and mental illness. I have been an advocate for those on the margins. If you have been called to this ministry, I am sure that you discovered early on that the work can be daunting, exhilarating, gratifying, stressful, and sometimes lonely. It very easily can take a toll on you.

It was during these years of hands-on ministry that I began to sense a call to the monastic life. I loved what I was doing but I found myself reading everything that I could find pertaining to monasticism. I sensed that I needed a stronger and sustainable prayer life. God seemed to be leading me to a place that at first I did not understand. I believe that God was calling me to understand the link between active ministry and the contemplative life, but I had not made the connection yet. I took retreats to Benedictine and Trappist monasteries. I read about the Carthusians, the Trappists, the Desert Mothers and Fathers, and I began to consistently pray the Daily Office. I moved forward in my search for a connection to monastic life with the realization that I was married with family. I began to seek out ways to connect as an oblate or to become an associate of one of the traditional religious orders. My search led me to The Companions of St. Luke, OSB. After my initial interview with three senior members of the community, I was admitted to the postulancy; and throughout my postulancy and novitiate, I began an in-depth study of the *Rule of St. Benedict*.

What I discovered was the link that tied active social ministry and the monastic contemplative life. The Prologue of the *Rule* is where I began to make the connection. When I discovered Chapter 4, The Tools for Good Works, I came upon the purpose of my call as a Deacon and the call of all baptized people. In Chapter 4, Benedict is calling his followers to reach out to all those who are in need. I realized



that for Benedict to dedicate an entire chapter to ministering with others had to be a key element of his vision for the monastic life. Throughout the *Rule*, we find chapter after chapter that focuses on the care of Benedict's brothers. Some examples include Chapter 36, The Care of the Sick, Chapter 34, Equal Distribution, Chapters 28 and 29 teach on Forgiveness, Chapter 7 provides lessons in Humility – and there are many others.

In my studies, I also made the discovery that the *Rule* is an amplification of our Baptismal vows. I would suggest that we all need to read through the Baptismal Vows of the *Book of Common Prayer* often. It is in these vows that we, all the Baptized, find our charge for ministry. We are called to "Respect the Dignity of every human being." St. Benedict, in his gentle but firm way, calls his followers to a life of disciplined prayer by praying the Daily Offices, contemplation, private prayer, and formation to provide the spiritual foundation so that we are capable and enabled to carry out the hard work of ministering to those around us. The monastic way, and more specifically the Benedictine life has instilled within me the prayer discipline and structure that I so desperately needed.

The chapters in the *Rule* on prayer have taught me that I cannot continue to face the challenges of working with others without a structured prayer life. My times of Lectio Divina, personal prayer and contemplation nourish my active ministry. I simply cannot continue to do what I do without my quiet time with God. Much of my personal prayer time is sitting in silence. I try to listen to what God might be saying to me. Most of the time I come up short, but this discipline has taught me how to listen to others. Most of the time I do not have the answers to the myriad of questions that come my way, but I can at least be present and patient.

My journey to date with Benedictine monasticism has given me the spiritual foundation for active social justice ministry. For me, action and contemplation work together to fulfill my Baptismal vows of caring for others. A structured prayer life is what I needed to sustain me in my ministry. You might be asking the same question. Is the monastic tradition compatible with active social justice ministry? What I have discovered is yes. For me, both spiritual paths have become one.

"But let us ask our Lord with the psalmist and say, 'Who will dwell in your tent, Lord; who will find rest upon your holy hill?'" (*Ps 14 (15):1*) After this question, let us hear our Lord answering and showing us the way that leads to the tent, saying, "The one who walks without stain and works justice." (*RB Prologue 23-25.*)

## Opus Dei: Benedictine Work in Our Churches

By Sr. Brigid Gerns, Obl/OSB



I am a Benedictine Oblate. It is the belief of The Companions St. Luke, Order of St. Benedict (CSL), that Benedictine Oblation is an authentic vocation, an alternative to professed life that is defined by its own tradition and history. So as a Benedictine Oblate, I've promised to make the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the Benedictine vows of Obedience, Stability, and Conversion of Life (also referred to as Fidelity to Monastic Life) my rules of life. The role of Oblates is to live in the world, to become holy in the world, to do what we can to bring the world to God by being witnesses of Christ by word and example to those around us.

For me, this is a “servant” centered ministry. I listen for God’s call, showing me or drawing me to places where I can support the needs of God’s kingdom. I have lived this out in a number of ways within my parish community. I have always loved every aspect of the liturgy, so it is natural to live that love out by working as a Sacristan (Altar Guild member). I enjoy being sure that every piece of the vessels and linen are polished, laundered, and perfectly placed for a service. But my work is more inclusive than that. I take a turn baking bread to use in the Eucharist and take my turn to wash all of the Altar Linens, small and large. I work in the group of Sacristans to help all of us prepare our worship space for the special seasons and liturgies of the church year. Working on this is a calming and (mostly) contemplative activity for me. I am offering my time and my talents in a concrete way that lets me show my love and reverence for God. I would also say that my service as a Lector, Lay Eucharistic Minister, and Choir member are also part of this offering and expression of love.

Of course, God may call us to many different types of activities for God’s kingdom. Feeding and housing the hungry has always been important; goodness knows there are so many people in need in our own time. Even more important is to feed and house someone in need while giving them skills and training so they can return to an independent life. For example, my parish church is a founding member of a regional program called Family Promise, which has such a mission. Although I didn’t feel called to be on the founding committee which raised money and marketed the program to other churches, I looked forward to meeting the guests and helping in the activities at the church.

My other favorite activity that God has drawn me to is Education for Ministry (EfM). For those who haven’t heard of this, it’s a four-year program of Bible study, church history, and theology for adults that’s been created, and is run, by the Seminary of The University of the South, at Sewanee. The program is run locally by specially trained parishioners called Mentors. Each one must go every year to a two-day

training/refreshment course in order to maintain accreditation to lead the course. I have been an EFM Mentor for more than 15 years, and been involved for more than 20 years. I can't say enough about what a gift it has been to be called to lead small groups of God's people through this course of study. I have always loved the idea of sharing ideas and information with others. I have learned so much, over time, as most teachers will tell you. Almost every session has a sacred moment that graces the whole group. Every time I think about it, I praise God again for leading me to work with the Logos and the Holy Spirit in this part of God's Kingdom.

Over the last 20 plus years as a Benedictine Oblate with CSL, the *Rule* has informed and enriched my life. I have a newfound alertness to listen for God's call in my life, and an openness to follow where God leads me, even if it is odd or unfamiliar, because I know that God is with me, as are all my Benedictine brothers and sisters who hold all up in prayer.

# Opus Dei: Living as a Professed Benedictine in the Workaday World

By Br. Anskar Nonken, OSB<sup>+</sup>

I oftentimes felt called to live out my Christian faith in some way beyond Sunday church and traditional church activities. I considered for years whether or not the monastic life might be the right answer to fill the void I felt in my spiritual life. Even after I had reached a point in life when the door to traditional monastic orders had been closed, I still felt that call. And then I discovered that there was another option for me and that was joining a monastic community where we are cloistered in the heart not in a physical space. As Joan Chittister notes when speaking of her dispersed community, “Now, through Monasteries of the Heart, this healing presence is carried beyond the monastery walls and into homes, and offices, and schools, and marketplaces, and prisons. Everywhere people are learning to live an ordinary life, extraordinarily well.”



Three things struck me as I began my monastic journey with The Companions of St. Luke, Order of St. Benedict (CSL), under the direction of my formation guide: Listen, Pray Continuously, and Prefer Nothing to Christ. St. Benedict begins his *Rule* with the word listen; and as I entered community, it was stressed to me that I needed to make the space to listen—to listen to the direction of the Abbot (the Superior) and my elders in the community as they could provide information that would help me to navigate this new way of life as well as to listen to God. Defining dedicated time to listen to God was one of the greatest challenges I faced as I sought to navigate around work, family, church, friend and other demands on my time. For me, the primary solution has been to start my day earlier than I used to. I have found the peacefulness of the undisturbed morning (before the rest of the household is up and bustling around and the worries of the day to come have intruded) to be a great time to quiet myself and listen to what God is saying to me.

Our CSL community gathers for two one-week gatherings a year. During those weeks at the monastery it seems like a reasonable goal to pray continuously. We often joke that if we aren't eating, we must be praying because it seems like those two activities make up our days. However, I have struggled with how does that translate when we go back to living in the world. I will be the first to admit that sometimes life gets in the way of a Daily Prayer Office. I take great comfort in remembering that there are Benedictines in general and CSL specifically all over the world. So, if I can't get to Noon prayer until 3:00 in the afternoon, I am just praying with my west coast brothers and sisters instead of those on the east coast. I have also found that having a Psalm or a portion of one memorized provides great flexibility in saying a quick office. Just

add a simple opening statement, the Lord's Prayer, some intercessions and a closing statement and you have a relatively quick "office prayer" that can be said without the need to have any external materials. If all else fails and I have no other option, then I simply offer a few words of acknowledgement and thanks to God and offer up to Him whatever task I am performing.

Preferring nothing to Christ is a goal that I strive for but will not likely achieve until the time of my death. I, like many others I suspect, find times when some other "thing" has momentarily overtaken the number one spot. When I recognize it, I take the time to reorient myself. I remember that God is always willing to forgive. My experience with CSL has been life giving. It is certainly true that living into a monastic calling while remaining in the world has some challenges. But, the joy of "living" in community, the fellowship with my brothers and sisters, and the solid foundation provided through the daily monastic practices make all the effort worthwhile.

## Perseverance and Balance in a Changing World

By Sr. Toni Sylvester, OSB

When people see me in the black habit, they are curious and they ask, without hesitancy or rudeness, “Who are you?” The question I actually answer is: “Why are you wearing the black habit?” I tell them I am part of a Benedictine community, The Companions of St. Luke; and, if their curiosity continues, I tell them I am a Vowed Benedictine who began as an Oblate. This answer usually leads to a second and harder question: “What does being that kind of Benedictine mean?” I often begin an answer by mentioning monks and nuns, since most people I talk with are familiar with them but not many have heard of Episcopal monastics. It hasn’t been that many years since I first heard the term myself.



If the one I am talking with expresses further interest, I continue by mentioning the *Rule of St. Benedict*. I have been studying the *Rule of St. Benedict* for about fifteen years and the process of becoming more deeply rooted in religious life has been slow and gradual. I think the slow pace has been healthy for me, allowing me to learn and experience the Benedictine rule of life and leading me to a Benedictine community where I feel I belong, The Companions of St. Luke (CSL). I realize the growth process began first as a CSL oblate member (one membership option) and then continued over several years until one day the Holy Spirit led me to take life vows as a solemnly professed member. At each step along the way, I have had doubts yet I trusted God and moved steadily ahead, finding myself closer to Him and on an ever firmer footing. For me, moving slowly and carefully allows time to listen to God rather than my own ego and emotions. It is important each person move at his or her own pace in the religious life, taking time to become what God wants him/her to be.

When I talk to someone about my vocation, I try to give the sense that I am both a committed religious and an active member of the world, stressing again the idea of the dispersed Benedictines and the Companions as a bridge between the two. The Benedictine vows are a good fit for people who lead active business, family, church and community lives and they give people the structure in which to find a balance between contemplation and activity.

That last point is often the most important to people and they want, sometimes desperately, for someone to show them a way to have balance in their lives. It was this desire for balance and a way to integrate the different parts of my life into a healthy whole that attracted me to the *Rule of St. Benedict* in the first place so I understand why others seek balance. If I am asked for details, I describe a day that revolves

around regular prayer, work, rest and play. I want people to see that being a religious can and does fit very well with active lives as long as we maintain that balance taught by St. Benedict.

Following the disciplined life of a Life-Professed (Vowed) Benedictine is not a solitary exercise. I am first of all part of the community of The Companions of St. Luke and I stay in frequent communication with the other members. In turn, our community is one of many Benedictine orders around the world. There have been followers of the *Rule of St. Benedict* for over fifteen hundred years so I can see myself as part of a long series of religious. Even though I say my daily prayers at home alone, I am part of that vast community and there are many others around the world saying the same prayers at the same time. We are all followers of Christ and students of the *Rule of St. Benedict*, living into our vows of obedience, stability, and fidelity to monastic life.

## The CSL Benedictine Way in Today's World

By Sr. Julian Smith-Boyer, OSB

While the path that led us to The Companions of St. Luke, OSB (CSL), under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is unique for each of us, we share a yearning for a deeper relationship with God and for a more intentional way of Christian living. This yearning has likely drawn us to explore different expressions of religious life where we discovered the *Rule of St. Benedict*, rooted in the ancient traditions of Christian life and worship, and CSL's contemporary approach to living under the *Rule*.



As Bishop Scarfe reminds us: “CSL provides a supporting role within a Church seeking to be nimble and agile and continuing to proclaim the eternal Gospel. We, as a dispersed order of Benedictine monastics, are shaped to live and serve in this Way.”

We aspire to “prefer nothing whatever to Christ” and we have committed, through our vows or promises, to a contemplative way of life inspired by St. Benedict to inform a life of service “helping to heal a wounded world” as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus and his disciples, including St. Luke, our Patron Saint. This commitment is given substance by the Benedictine vows that we have come to learn are an expression of the Baptismal vows that guide us as we contribute to the larger Body of Christ.

As Benedictines, we promise to fulfill our threefold vows of Fidelity to Monastic Life, Stability, and Obedience. These vows have been defined by many monastics over the ages and reflect the spiritual journeys of those individuals and communities who have gone before us. We are called to embrace the vows as our own as we listen to God and one another with open hearts and minds and pursue a life often viewed as countercultural. Listening to God (through prayer and contemplation) leads to community-based and individual forms of service.

CSL seniors who have gone before us have their stories to share about their journey from formation to transformation. In time, each of us may be called to share our unique story that will be understood by fellow Companions who are bound together by the love of Christ and who experience the joys and sorrows of life that flow from surrendering, with love, our will to God's Will.

God willing, CSL life-professed and full oblate members, will experience the reality of what St. Benedict envisioned and expressed in the prologue to the *Rule*: “[A]s we progress in this way of light and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.” (*RB* Prologue 49)



There are many ways to measure spiritual growth, perhaps the goal of our life's journey. The one that seems to shine above all others is "love"—our openness and readiness to give and receive love from God and our neighbors. Love is a word that is sometimes trivialized in our consumer culture; but has a treasured and sacred meaning within the context of being a Christian, of being a Benedictine and Companion, and of revealing our true selves as children of God. The love from and for God can be manifested by our prayers, study, and service, including care for our environment and all of God's creation, including our 'neighbors' who live nearby or far away.

In some ways, love is the first and last Word in the Bible that shares the Good News of Christ. It seems fitting to end this Reflection Booklet with this passage from the Bible [NRSV].

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ... Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.... So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." (*1 John 4:7-16*)