



St. Scholastica Priory, 271 North Main Street, PO Box 606, Petersham, MA 01366

## OUR JUDEA

I remember the first time I drove up to a monastery and saw a sign that read, "Monastic Enclosure – NO ADMITTANCE BEYOND THIS POINT." It frightened me and fascinated me. It is not the reason I eventually entered a monastery, but I have been thinking about the enclosure I now live in. What it is and what it isn't. It is most definitely a practice of monks and nuns to be apart, separated from some of the distractions that the world has to offer. Rufinus of Aquileia, who died in 410 AD, wrote in his *History of the Monks in Egypt* about monastic enclosure, "In the Thebaid we have also seen the well-known monastery of Isidore. It is bound in by extensive walls, so that it offers spacious accommodation to those who live here. Within the monastery, there are several springs, watered gardens, various orchards and gardens with trees. All needs are sufficiently and generously catered to so that none of the monks there need to go out in order to get anything. A worthy elder, who was chosen by the seniors, sits at the door. His task it is to receive the visitors .... Nearby there is a guesthouse, in which he receives the visitors and waits on them in all friendliness." This was fundamental for St Benedict too. "As regards the monastery: if possible it is to be so constituted that all necessities, such as water, mill, garden, and various crafts may be practiced within the monastery so there will be no necessity for the monks to wander outside; for this is not at all good for their souls" (RB 66:6). The enclosure was to be a place that nurtured their lives of prayer and provided for their physical needs.

Yet at the same time St Benedict realized that not everything could be done within the enclosure, and legislated for when

brothers would be too far to return for the prayer of the Divine Office, or even away for a longer journey.

St Benedict uses the word *claustra*, "enclosure," only two times: in Chapters 4 and 67. The word had various uses, but all basically referred to something that needed *claves*: "keys" to lock a door to a fortress, for instance, a prison, and even a monastery. Although the word "cloister" can be used to specify the covered walk, a kind of roofed



colonnade, that joined the various buildings or rooms, St Benedict's use has more in common with many old cities such as Lucca in Italy, Avila in Spain, or closer to home, Quebec City, and even the Vatican: cities surrounded by walls. They surrounded themselves with those walls for protection and definition of where the city began and where it ended. It was the geographic and structural support where one lived out a way of life.

Monastic legislators, though, went further. They advised returning monks to be careful about telling stories of what they saw or heard while they were outside the enclosure. St Benedict says that it can be "destructive" (RB 67.5), meaning "to pull down somehow." Dom Delatte, a 20th century commentator on the Rule of St Benedict, writes though, "St Benedict does not forbid the recital of everything seen or heard: for why not tell of edifying matters, or of certain harmless details? What he requires is that a man should not relate at random and thoughtlessly all that he has observed: *quaecumque*; for, says he, 'that can cause great harm.'" Even our mothers have told us that some things are best left unsaid! But there is still another reason given in *The Rule of the Master*, which was written a decade or two before the Rule of St Benedict. I think he makes an excellent point, writing, "Everything necessary should be within ... so there may not be frequent occasion for the brothers to go outside repeatedly and mingle with people of the world. Where we [monks] appear before the eyes of the devout and be venerated as angels by them, it would be more to our damnation ... since we *might* be considered saints which we are not" (RM 95.17). The enclosure was also meant to nurture and protect the commitment and virtue of the monks.

For us or our guests as we turn off Route 32 onto our driveway, we enter the monastic enclosure. All the property, which was given as a gift to our communities, is set apart for the praise and worship of God, a worn-out phrase, but true: a place apart. St Benedict wrote his Rule over 1,500 years ago; from the beginning he instructed that the monastery should have a porter to welcome guests, someone assigned to care

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and be with them. There should be a house for guests to stay in with beds, bedding, and kitchen. In fact, the abbot was told to share meals with them! In other words, guests were part of their way of life. Beyond those places, the church and some spaces within the monastery itself were to the more private living spaces for the monks or nuns.

Here within the enclosure of the monastery is where stability is lived with one's community, where perseverance in following Christ is lived day in and day out. It is our country, our land, our world. It is a place that contains us to be free, to be totally devoted to the service of Lord! Yet doesn't that seem small? Doesn't it seem as if we are cutting ourselves off from so many other important works in the Church and world? Most of us have had at least one person if not many say something like that when we spoke of entering a monastery. "Why are you going to go and waste your life, the gifts God gave you?"

And yet—think of Jesus. He didn't live in an enclosure surrounded by walls. But Jesus did live in a mighty small area considering he was the Savior of the world and held the entire cosmos in the palm of his hand, speaking metaphorically. There are 196.9 million square miles over the surface of the earth. Judea is .00068878% of the sphere: it covers about 1,350 square miles. At the time of Jesus, Judea was 55 miles long and 25 miles wide, and half of that was desert. You might call that Jesus' "enclosure." The universal work, grace, redemption of the Lord was not dependent or limited by proximity in place or time. He lived thirty-three years within that tiny, seemingly insignificant space, except for the period in Egypt. Out of Jesus, the action of God overflows onto the entire world, throughout the ages till the end of time for all humanity! St Gregory of Nyssa writes, "It is the whole of human nature, extending from the beginning to the end that constitutes the one image of HIM who is .... To say that there are 'many human beings' is a common abuse of language. Granted there is a plurality of those who share in the same human nature ... but in all of them, humanity is one." Jesus is the Savior of all.

Our enclosure shares this reality—not only in being insignificant, unknown to most, and small in relation to the vast world. But it also shares in the reality of God's overflowing grace pouring out of the lives of those who live within that enclosure, not due to themselves but to him: those who live in "his house, his school," persevering in the workshop fighting for the True King, Christ

## Sister Martha Gagnon, OSB



"God meets you where you are."  
"All in God's good time."  
"Grace builds upon nature."  
"There's no such thing as coincidence."  
"God works in mysterious ways ...."  
Hackneyed

phrases perhaps, ... and yet .... God did meet me where I was; he did it when he knew the time was ripe; God used my own nature and inclinations to guide the way and draw me in; 'coincidence' added upon 'coincidence' until I could see the pattern emerge; and in some mysterious way, God readied me for a change in the direction of my journey that was not part of my plans.

I was perfectly happy being a chef in Virginia; then 'I' changed 'my' plans and moved back to New England—just in time to take on the care of my uncle, newly diagnosed with Alzheimer's. The economy tanked, no one was eating out at high-end restaurants—but learning to handle my uncle's disease had left me prepared for a new career, one that suited me even more than cooking. I loved programming activities for my

memory impaired residents! I found myself being drawn back to practicing my faith, more fervently than ever. Then problems, from minute hiccups to gigantic quagmires, started cropping up: I had to put my plans aside to help with my parents declining health, move my residence, find a new job .... Meanwhile I found that not only was God sustaining me, but God was seeking me (me! of all people!) and he loved me, and that I loved him back. I was introduced to Petersham, drawn to become an Oblate, to learn and to live the rule of St Benedict "as my state in life allowed." Turns out, that wasn't enough—God had other plans.... The sisters at St Scholastica were open to God's plan, allowing me to do an Observership, despite my hardly being an ideal candidate. And now I am six months into my Novitiate.

Trusting someone you love frees you to follow where they lead, even if it wasn't where you planned on going. The freedom to surrender my plan, my will, and the trust required to give way to God's plan, is the paradox of my new life as Sr Martha. Some days it's an emphatic "Thy will be done!" Other days, it's: "Thy will be done, Thy will be done, (grrr, really?!) Thy will be done..." Every day: it's grace.

So let me end with one final well-worn phrase: "If you want to amuse God, make plans." But if you learn to listen with the ear of your heart, as St Benedict recommends, maybe you'll get a glimpse of what God has planned for you. Please pray for me as God continues to reveal his will. And know that I am praying for you.

the Lord, who uses the lowly things as he always has, to accomplish his redemptive work.

This is our house of God, the school of his service, the workshop, the training field to serve under Christ the true King. Here we use the tools in following him. Here we work hard to remain faithful to the Lord who called us to give ourselves, body and soul, to praying the Opus Dei, praying for the world, serving one another in love, with all that means in "our Judea". Each moment, from that first drive by the gateposts into this monastic enclosure to the foot of the cemetery cross, lives opening into the Heavenly Jerusalem!  
MMEK

### Wonder what it is like?



**Come and see!**

Monastic Weekend

October 5-7

For details see:

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

*With all of, you we are beseeching  
God for healing for all hurt, reparation  
and rededication in the Church.*

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Our tax I.D. # is 222-617-059

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# HAPPENINGS

April 18. Mother Mary Elizabeth and Father Gregory went to the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Connecticut for the meeting of the New England superiors.

April 20. At our well-attended spring Oblate retreat Br. Jerome gave the talk.

May 19th. Philip and Carol Zaleski arranged for Professor James Nolan to come and speak to us about his grandfather, the atom bomb and the Catholics of Nagasaki.



June 26. Professor Luis Giron-Negron, a great friend of the Zaleskis and ours, spoke on St John of the Cross and his ties to Hebrew scholars of his day.

July 3. Sr. Gertrude's family arrived from North Carolina and Georgia for a visit.



July 25. An old friend, Father Jude Israel, OSB, of St. Joseph's Abbey, Louisiana, stopped by.



August 4-12. Our annual retreat was held; Father Leobardo Almazán, OP gave the conferences on the Benedictine vow of *conversio morum* and the virtues. A gift!



July 5. After Vespers we had a party to celebrate Sr. Christine's final radiation treatment. We are very grateful to our friends who helped drive her to the appointments, and thankful that all is well. Since our last newsletter two other sisters also had surgeries; all are recovering well.



August 17. The foundation was poured for the cemetery crucifix and finished on the 24th. The brown granite came from India. It was very moving for the owner of the monument company and his helper to attach the Corpus.

June 8-10. We held our summer Monastic Experience Weekend; six lovely young women participated.



July 19. Sister Maria Isabel's family visited from New York and Boston. All her family were together for a few days.



August 22. The memorial of the Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary is special to us because of our beautiful statue that moved from Our Lady Queen Monastery in Tickfaw, LA. Among other things we gather outside at the end of Compline to sing the last hymn of the day to Mary.



June 10. Mother Mary Elizabeth traveled to New Mexico to conduct the regular visitation of the Monastery of Our Lady of the Desert.



June 19. Sr. Mechtilde's family came to visit from Florida and New Hampshire.



June 20. Sr. Martha's mother, Mrs. Theresa Gagnon, died. Sister was grateful to have had a good final conversation on the last evening of her mother's life.

July 23. For our annual outing we saw the World War I exhibit at the Knights of Columbus Museum in New Haven, Connecticut.



Afterwards we attended Mass at the nearby community of Sisters of Jesus Crucified, and ate lunch with them. On our way home we stopped for ice cream.

July 24. Sr. Emmanuel went home to stay with her father while he has treatments for an aggressive form of leukemia. We ask your prayers for him.

We've had several maintenance projects in recent months: the chimneys and roof of our house were repaired, and the driveway patched. Also the guesthouse windows and the water system were replaced.

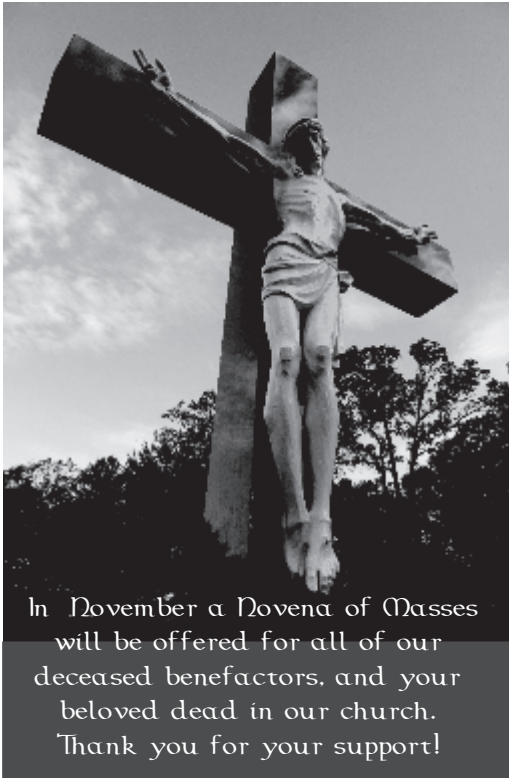
This has been an exceptional year for wildlife on our property: a moose in our pond, a black bear on the terrace, and an egg-laying snapping turtle in the back rock garden. It's also been exceptional for extreme weather: between long, heavy rains and severe heat waves the gardens have suffered, but with the hard work of the young sisters, the vegetable garden still had a delicious harvest.



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*Above is our cemetery crucifix that stands 12 feet high. A visible reminder of Jesus' watching over us.*

## WILD THINGS VISIT THE MONASTERY

If you go to Google Map and put in our street address and then click on "satellite" you will understand better how this could happen! Our buildings are set back from Route 32. We live, truly, in the forest! In this little town is located the Federated Women's Club Forest with over 1,000 acres, Harvard Forest with 4,000, as well as the State Forest and bordering on the Quabbin Reservoir makes the human presence very small.



Wild Turkeys are regular visitors here but this year the wildlife made their presence even more apparent. The first unusual visitor was an adolescent bull moose! He stopped for a drink in our back pond and fell in. You might think that it would be easy for him to get out. NO. Or you might think that having a police officer, two environmental police officers, two pumper trucks from the fire department with their crews would make it easy. NO. From about 8:30 PM to 1:15 AM all their tricks were tried including pumping out thousands of gallons of water with no luck. All finally decided to let the poor animal calm down and figure it out now that the water was lower. It did within a half hour! It was fun though. We even made popcorn to watch the show!



Shortly after a big black bear made its presence known by++ snacking on the bird-feeders and then showing itself in the daylight! We take the bird feeders in at night now. Then, Sr Mary Frances noticed a strange rock in the garden she cares for in our backyard. There was something about that rock though. It wasn't a rock. It was a snapping turtle laying its eggs. She has the area marked and waiting for the little ones to hatch!

Porcupines love to graze in the lower lawn by the cemetery. There was even a family staying for awhile under the shed in the back. Chaeli's presence doesn't seem to intimidate these wild cousins. They are amazing!

