



Cultivating Peace, Presence in Your Life

Step onto the grounds of St. Mary Monastery and you'll be struck by a sense of peace that nearly thrums. It's in the air. It's also in the Sisters who embody that peace. They embody something more as well. Call it presence. Presence to you, presence to one another. Presence to God. ▶



Connecting
Point



Presence is a state of being that focuses on the moment, whether that moment is with another person or in your own mind. In the moment, you worry neither about the past nor the future. You give your whole attention to the now: to the place you find yourself, to the task at hand, to the person you encounter.

The contemplative practices that promote Benedictine peace and presence are available to everyone. Here, the Sisters and their friends share some of their favorite practices.

The sun is rising as Sister Claudia Scharf tucks her pants into her socks. She's meeting a friend for a hike in the monastery woods and wants to keep the ticks off. Hat secured, bug repellent sprayed, binoculars slung over her shoulder and well-worn Peterson's Field Guide in hand, they step into the early summer morning, quiet but for the birds and crickets.

Buffalo gnats float in clouds above the well-prepared Sister. Her guest, having forgotten to apply bug spray, encounters them head on, windshield-wiping the air in front of her face as they walk. This is just another time a Benedictine Sister is noticeably calmer, quieter and more peaceful than others.

"Those swallows come back every year." Sr. Claudia is pointing at the birds swooping overhead alongside Benet House. "There's a rose-breasted grosbeak. He eats at our feeder. There's a red-bellied woodpecker."

Do the Benedictine Sisters enter this community because they love nature or do they grow to love it once here? Either way, loving nature – really seeing it, listening to it and learning from it – is something they share.

Credit their life of contemplative prayer. From the first line of the

Rule of St. Benedict – Listen with the ear of your heart – to the daily practice of Lectio Divina, Benedictines learn to still themselves; to cultivate presence, to what they are doing, to those they are with, and to God.

"When I go out in nature, I feel God's arms wrapped around me," Sr. Claudia says. A woodland choir of many-fluted voices rings out beyond Sand Creek and along the well-worn path of the forest. Sticks and leaves crunch underfoot. The cool air warms near the opening to the prairie just ahead.

"Nature reflects God," she says. "To notice all living things – birds, flying insects, ants, worms – is a reverence to God who created everything." The sun has risen above the tree line, driving away the gnats along the mowed prairie path. The sounds are different here: buzzing, clicking, chucking and chirping fill the air. Despite this new, loud chorus, a profound sense of quiet prevails.

Contemplative practices like this early morning hike are what spiritual writer and Episcopalian priest Cynthia Bourgeault calls tools of wisdom that can awaken our hearts.

"Awakening the heart may sound like one of those lofty but unattainable ideals ... but the task itself is quite doable," she writes in *The Wisdom* ▶

Way of Knowing. “You could even say that we were born for it, because only with awakened hearts are we actually able to fulfill our purpose within the cosmos and take our place in that great dance of divine manifestation.”

Back into the woods now, a chickadee calls. (Sister Charlotte Sonnevile interprets its sweet high flute as singing, *Praise God*. She sings it to herself as she walks, alternating with the cardinal’s answer: *Cheer, Cheer!*)

The hike ends by 8 o’clock, in time for Lauds (morning prayer). The Benedictines gather in their chapel every day for Lauds, Noonday Prayer and Vespers, where they chant psalms and pray other prayers. Praying is another contemplative practice, Sister Marilyn Ring notes, that “draws us into awareness of God’s presence. We are all called to this awareness, but we are so into ourselves that we are often unresponsive to what might be wonderful contemplative experiences.”

Contemplative practices – being in nature, listening to music, praying – enhance our awareness of God, our presence to Presence. They prepare us to respond.

Favorite Contemplative Practices

It’s Monday after Mass. Some Sisters have gathered for coffee in the dining room. Diane Petrotte, a monastery volunteer and academy alumna, has joined Sisters Helen Carey, Marilyn Ring and Marlene Miller. Conversation topics range from the weather to the chipmunk foraging under the bird feeders, cheeks full and then empty, full and then empty.

Even in this communal space, you get the feeling of a peaceful quiet, perhaps due to the fact that they’ve just come from an hour and a half of prayer together. They are asked to share the contemplative practice they are most drawn to.

“I like sitting and watching nature in my backyard,” Diane volunteers.

“Deer, raccoons, opossums, wild turkeys, birds. I found a snake and toad on my patio one night. That was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

Sr. Helen nods. “I like to sit in a quiet place inside or outside and watch the sky and clouds.”

Sr. Marlene says she goes to her room, lights a candle, listens to classical music and does some deep breathing. “It reenergizes my spirit’s batteries.” ▶



Letter from the Prioress

Sr. Sandra Brunenn, OSB

I have recently returned from a week with the Sisters of Annunciation Monastery in Bismarck, North Dakota. The monastery sits on a high bluff overlooking the Missouri River.

The sunrise and sunset there is soooo expansive—the view I experienced there continues to stir me to awe and wonder! Every 3 years representatives from 9 Benedictine communities around the world gather to pray, share our hopes and challenges, and draw energy from our common commitment to the Rule of Benedict. We learned our Sisters in Puerto Rico and the Bahamas, still struggling from hurricane ravages, are drawing hope from the renewal of nature in their gardens. Our Sisters in Taiwan told us how the monks in a nearby male monastery have joined the Sisters for their beginning phase of formation in Benedictine life.

We shared daily life with Sisters from Washington state, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Japan. A wonderfully rich experience! I left renewed in gratitude for the Spirit of Benedict alive all around our earth home. I pray you will be touched by this same spirit as you read this issue of Connecting Point!

Centering Prayer

Prayer styles and practices that lead to contemplation help us get out of the way of ourselves. They help silence our minds, so that we can rest in God. And the first step is just to say, “Here I am.”

Sister Jackie Walsh says that’s the most important step in Centering Prayer, a practice dating back to the 4th century.

“When you think of prayer, most people think of attention – the method, the words, the place,” Sr. Jackie says. “But Centering Prayer is about intention. It leads you into the deep waters of your heart where you meet God.”

Sister Marianne Burkhard says Centering Prayer is integral to her daily life as well.

“Centering Prayer leads to a contemplative stance,” she says. “I go for a walk or look out the window and it’s contemplative. I’m seeing what I’m seeing, but I’m very aware of what’s behind it. It all speaks of the depth of life and God and creation.”

Lectio Divina

Sister Margaret Murphy says she practices Centering Prayer as the final, resting step of *Lectio Divina*.

Lectio Divina – literally, *Sacred Reading* – was a practice formalized by St. Benedict that is still used in Benedictine monasteries across the globe today. A four-step prayer, it begins with reading a short piece of Holy Scripture and ends in silence, resting in God.

“These prayer practices help me be more present to the moment, the person, the event,” Sr. Margaret says. “They help me see reality the way God sees it, so that in everything – dusting a table, sorting papers, writing a poem – I bring presence to that.”

Sr. Margaret will help teach an introductory program on Lectio at Benet House this fall (see footnote). Another teacher, Benedictine Oblate Linda Clewell, will join her.

“Lectio Divina helps keep me grounded and in God’s presence,” Linda says. “It’s most commonly done with Scripture, but also can be done with music, nature, poetry. You sit with the Word in God’s presence, then think about it during the day.”

Like Sr. Margaret, Linda says it helps keep her mindful of God no matter what she’s doing. ▶



Sister Jackie Walsh, front, prays Lauds in chapel with Sisters Sandra Brunenn, Helen Carey and Claudia Scharf.





Sister Margaret Murphy leads a discussion at Benet House Retreat Center.



“You can do something – drive somewhere, maybe – and not see anything in particular. Just arrive. But if you are in the practice of contemplation you see everything and see it differently. You are awake not just in mind but in heart.”

The Rosary

Legend sets the origination of the rosary in 1214, when the Blessed Mother was said to have given it to St. Dominic. For Sister Sheila McGrath, praying the rosary creates a contemplative stance that nourishes her all day.

She combines it with an early morning walk.

“I walk with it every morning. I state my intentions as I walk down the stairs and out the door, then just pray the rosary as I walk around the lake. It helps me live in the present moment each day. It helps keep me from getting caught up in past or future worries.”

Ready to Rest in God’s Embrace

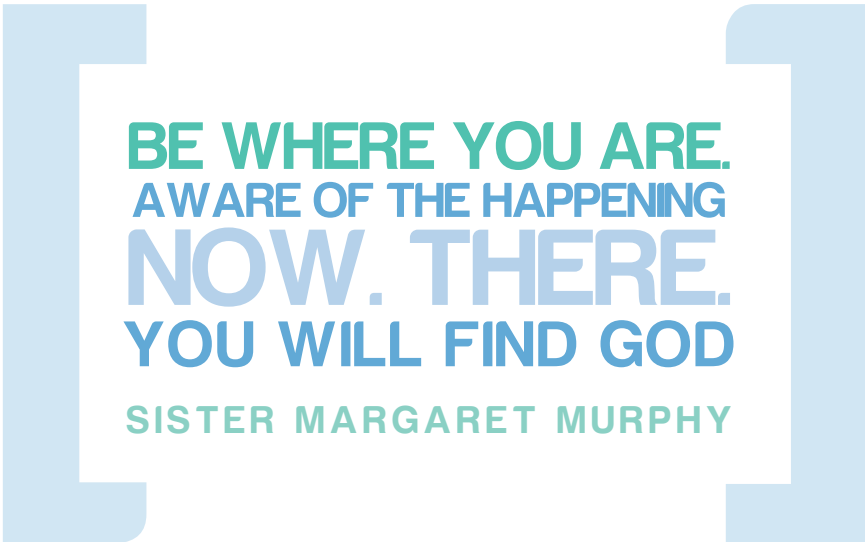
“We are all blessed with the opportunity for contemplative moments,” Sr. Catherine Cleary says. “Listening to Mozart, watching a sunrise or gazing at

a baby might produce a contemplative moment if we are ready for it.” So, we are called to be ready. How? Just show up ... wherever we are.

“Every place is a sacred, holy place,” Sister Mary Jane Wallace says. “Where you are right now is sacred. A contemplative moment can be this intimate moment, where you say no words but simply rest in God’s embrace.”

Benedictine Oblates are Christian laywomen and men who seek to enrich their life with the ancient wisdom of St. Benedict. Learn more at smmsisters.org.

Monthly Lectio Divina classes begin Sept. 18 at 10:00 a.m. at Benet House Retreat Center at St. Mary Monastery. Learn more at smmsisters.org/retreats.



**BE WHERE YOU ARE.
AWARE OF THE HAPPENING
NOW. THERE.
YOU WILL FIND GOD**
SISTER MARGARET MURPHY



The Practical Work of Quiet

Contemplative listening is to be drawn out of oneself totally into what the other is saying – without losing oneself. - Mary Dingman, SSSF

In a world filled with busyness, noise and clutter, it's easy to get caught up in the distractions of daily life. But the work of quiet is worth everything, for it is in the silence that God speaks. It is in the silence that we find knowing.

Listening

When discerning major decisions, we all encounter difficulty in communicating differing opinions.

The process called Contemplative Dialogue – or deep listening or presence – is taking a long, loving look at the real as it offers itself to you. It begins with the basic tenet that *You are sacred mystery*. And when you are in another's presence, *You are in the presence of sacred mystery*.

This practice embraces three attitudes: 1) a contemplative stance – openness to life and awareness; 2) non-violent engagement in word, thought, and spirit; and 3) undefended learning – openness, compassion, and humility toward others. It opens the door to deep understanding and reverence.

Making a Decision

Done in the context of silence, presence, and prayer, discernment leads us in making major personal and communal decisions.

The greatest challenge to using this contemplative approach is the amount of time involved, either individually or communally. In our quick-fix society, it's difficult to go through a discernment process on God's time rather than our own. However, the time and effort put into the discernment process is well worth it.

Why Bother?

Awareness of our response to others has larger implications. Contemplation – that quiet place of becoming open to the world – helps support the church's call for justice and peace. Truly, it ultimately benefits more than the individual and the community, for it is only through personal transformation that systemic transformation becomes possible.

- Sister Phyllis McMurray (Adapted from her essay in the 2008 Occasional Papers, an LCWR publication)



Surrender Darkness to Light

Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark. - Tagore

One late winter day, the sun came out and warmed the earth. An older woman, blind since birth, felt the warmth of the light and followed it outside. She followed it to a bench and sat down to enjoy the comfort. Holding a Bible in her lap, she ran her fingers over the words.

Sitting quietly, she absorbed the words in her heart. Though she could see nothing, she understood everything.

When we sit still, we become aware of the darkness within, the turmoil we experience. Naming the chaos and claiming it, darkness surrenders to light, to a new relationship with God, and a profound hope.

- Sister Phyllis McMurray (Published in Hope in the Midst of Darkness, Leadership Conference of Women Religious, 2010)

Exploring the Benedictine Oblate Program

Ask Florrie Dammers what drew her to the Benedictine Oblate program, and she'll begin with the Sisters themselves but segue quickly into their spirituality.

“Sister Marilyn Ring just radiated joy and welcome,” Florrie remembers of their first meeting. “She stood out as very different. When I met Sister Audrey Cleary, her hospitality was so noticeable. It was striking.”

Florrie was drawn to the peace, calm and welcome the Sisters shared, and began attending Oblate meetings regularly.

She says she began to find her *deep center* as she learned what it means to live according to the Rule of Benedict. She learned how to pray, work and live with other people in peace and mutual reverence while deepening her own relationship with God.

“Learning Lectio Divina and Centering Prayer changed me,” she says. “They feed my spirit. And St. Benedict helps me navigate everyday life.” Now co-coordinator of Central Illinois Contemplative Outreach, Florrie says she employs what she learns every day.

“Recently, I had to guide the decision-making around a relocation of our meeting place. We used the Benedictine discernment process that included prayerfulness and deep listening. Because we were inclusive of all voices, we were able to choose a new space that serves us all very well.”

Another example defused potential conflict.

“A person wanted to join our group, but I felt he would disrupt the group’s purpose, which is peace and prayerfulness. Thanks to St. Benedict, I’ve been able, as a centering prayer facilitator, to set firm boundaries to safeguard the purpose, prayerfulness, and peace of the group. I have been empowered to say *No* with love and kindness.

She says St. Benedict also models forgiveness beautifully.

“I now try always to stop and say, ‘What’s my part in this?’ when there’s a problem with someone. The Rule of St. Benedict is full of wisdom for living in relationship with others. It’s so relevant.”

Benedictine spirituality begins with the first word of the Rule: *Listen*. When you “Listen with the ear of your heart,” as St. Benedict urges us, you begin to change yourself ... and become who you are called to be.

To learn more about the Benedictine Oblate program, visit smmsisters.org or email us at Oblates@smmsisters.org.



*Benedictine Oblate
Florrie Dammers*





Sisters Stefanie MacDonald, Marianne Burkhardt, Ruth Ksycki and Sandra Brunenn attended the General Chapter Meeting of the Federation of St. Benedict at Annunciation Monastery in Bismarck, ND this summer.

Community News

- *Sister Bobbi Bussan* has stepped down from her position as chair of St. Joseph the Worker House in Rock Island. A transitional housing resource for women and their children, Sr. Bobbi helped found and develop the facility with Sr. Germaine Cupp until the latter's death. Sr. Bobbi served as chair for 12 years.

Sr. Bobbi will concentrate on her work planning for the 2018 CIB Symposium scheduled for Sept. 3-13 in Rome. CIB - *Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum* - brings together, in a sisterly bond, the nuns and sisters of the Benedictine Confederation worldwide. It enables us to experience the rich expression of the Benedictine spirituality as lived in our communities.

- *Sister Marianne Burkhardt* retired from the Marriage Tribunal of the Peoria Diocese after 25 years of service.

- *Benedictine Oblates* shared book recommendations that include everything from light summer reads to challenging spiritual reflections. Visit smmsisters.org and click on "What's New" for the list!



Sister Rose Joseph Kennebeck, OSB 1929-2018

Sister Rose Joseph, 88, died Tuesday, May 15, 2018 at the monastery.

Born September 15, 1929 in Kansas City, Missouri, Sr. Rose Joseph entered the Benedictine community Aug. 15, 1948 and made her final profession June 24, 1953. She attended St. Teresa's College, Kansas City, MO; Duchesne College Omaha, NE; St. Ambrose College, Davenport, IA and the University of Illinois at Champaign. Sr. Rose Joseph's ministry included serving as a teacher throughout the Peoria Diocese, and in Chicago, IL.



Sister Norberta Vandersnick, OSB 1927-2018

Sister Norberta, 90, died Saturday, July 7, 2018 at UnityPoint Health-Trinity, Rock Island.

Born August 19, 1927 in Atkinson, IL, Sr. Norberta entered the Benedictine community Sept. 8, 1945 and made her final profession Aug. 16, 1950. She graduated from St. Mary's Academy, Nauvoo, IL and attended St. Ambrose College, Davenport, IA. Sr. Norberta's chief areas of ministry were food service management, education and caring for the sick.



Keep Todas Familias Together

The Benedictine Sisters welcomed the public and members of diverse religious and cultural communities to our grounds to pray for immigrant and suffering families Sat. July 14.

The service, called *Keep Todas Familias Together (Keep All Families Together)*, was so-named to demonstrate our solidarity with our entire human family. Approximately 70 people attended.

Sister Mary Core (above, left) organized the service with Sister Stefanie MacDonald. “As we pray today for our nation and those who suffer, let us give thanks for our many blessings,” Sr. Mary prayed. “May our prayer together strengthen our resolve to work tirelessly for peace and for just immigration reform.”

Rabbi Linda Bertenthal from Temple Emanuel, Davenport, IA prayed a Shabbat children’s blessing.

Rev. Jerome Green from Anchored in the Lord Ministries, Rock Island, IL (above) prayed, “We Live Above Nature” by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. Lisa Killinger, Muslim Community of the Quad Cities, prayed a Sufi prayer for peace.

Olivia Best, a young woman of Mexican heritage, shared a story of an immigrant child’s horrific experience. We also read a lovely Native American prayer submitted by Josie Ironshield, Sage Sisters of the Quad Cities.

The bells rang, the sun shone, and - during the Native American prayer - the Lord spoke volumes in thunder. When the rains came at the end of the service, it was hard not to see them as God’s holy tears.

“We cry to You from the depths of our hearts,” Sister Sandra Brunenn said, as the first drops fell. “Hear our cry for separated families, refugees, migrants, immigrants and all who suffer injustice.”

Sr. Sandra says she hopes the service helps remind people that Jesus himself was an immigrant who taught his followers to love and care for all.

“Our faith demands that we speak out for and stand in solidarity with all who are hurting,” she says. “It’s what Jesus Christ called us to do.”

SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT.

PSALM 34

The Class of 1967 enjoyed their reunion at Benet House June 1-3, 2018. Left to right: Kate Owens Reuland, Coleen Whalen Chaoui, Mary Anne Genz Duerbusch, Roseann Day Munson, Sue Clarey Moore, Lois Horning Byers.



In Memoriam ...

Jean Novotny Peters, '53 died Feb. 14, 2018.

Amy, daughter of **Andrea Abrams '65**, died.

Dave Holly, husband of **Barb O'Connor, '69** died Easter Sunday.

Charles Esau, husband of **June Lester Esau, '43** died March 2018.

Lanny Minnaert, husband of **Veronica Hecks Minnaert, '62** died April 2018.

Terri Pollock Mares, '63 died Oct. 31, 2017.

Tim Holland, husband of **Jean Waldsmith, '76** died May 2018.

Dave, husband of **Linda Haas, '67** died May 2018.

Linda Cole, '69 died May 9, 2018.

Mary Burling Wilkens, '43 died June, 2018.

Mary Piletic Johnson, '60 died on June 19, 2018.

Reunion Announcements

Class of 1959 | Sept. 28-30, 2018

Class of 1973 | Oct. 12-14, 2018

Class of 1975 | Oct. 4-6, 2019

Attention Alums:

Reserve your space at Benet House as early as possible to improve your chance of securing space for your next reunion. We fill up years in advance!



Sisters of St. Benedict

St. Mary Monastery
2200 88th Avenue West
Rock Island, IL 61201-7649
309-283-2100 • 309-283-2200 FAX
www.smmsisters.org

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Fax: 309-283-2200

Editor

Susan Flansburg

benedictines@smmsisters.org

www.smmsisters.org