

# THE BENEDICTINE BULLETIN Summer FALL 2022



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

In the middle of September an unexpected feast day in the Church's calendar falls: The Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? The *Exaltation* of the Holy Cross? How can these apparently contradictory terms - Exaltation and Cross - be joined? Synonyms for exaltation are "acclamation," "acclaim," "honor," and more. Synonyms for cross are far from that: crucible, fire, trial, woe. But there are other realities in our Catholic faith that holds two opposites together: God/man, virgin/mother....

St Helena (ca. 246/248-328), the mother of the Roman emperor, Constantine (ca. 280-337), made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and, according to tradition, found three crosses buried. A miracle of healing revealing that one was Jesus' cross. She left a part of that Cross in Jerusalem, sent a part to Rome and took a part with her to Constantinople.

In 569 Emperor Justin II of Rome sent a gift to Queen Radegund of the Franks: a relic of the True Cross. St. Venantius Fortunatus, a Latin poet and hymnographer in the Merovingian Court, was commissioned to write a hymn to accompany the procession welcoming it. It has been called the greatest of all the Christian hymns: *Vexilla Regis prodeunt* (The royal banners forward go).

In 614 the army of Persian Emperor Chrosoes II captured Jerusalem and carried off the city's relic of the True Cross. After a battle Emperor Heraclius brought it back to Jerusalem. *The Golden Legend*, a collection of stories combining fact and fiction written in 1265 by Jacopo de Voragine, a Dominican friar, recounts a lovely description of this return. I have no idea if it is true or not, but what is portrayed could not be more on the mark. From *The Golden Legend*:

"Now Heraclius carried the sacred cross back to Jerusalem. He rode down the Mount of Olives, mounted on his royal

## EXALTED



palfrey and arrayed in imperial regalia, intending to enter the city by the gate through which Christ had passed on his way to crucifixion. But suddenly the stones of the gateway fell down and locked together, forming an unbroken wall. To the amazement of everyone, an angel of the Lord, carrying a cross in his hands, appeared above the wall and said: "When the King of heaven passed through this gate to suffer death, there was no royal pomp. He rode a lowly ass, to leave an example of humility to his worshipers." With those words the angel vanished.

The emperor shed tears, took off his boots and stripped down to his shirt, received the cross of the Lord into his hands, and humbly carried it toward the gate. The hardness of the stones felt the force of a command from heaven, and the gateway raised itself from the ground and opened wide to allow passage to those entering."

Since the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the Feast of the Holy Cross has been celebrated on September 14<sup>th</sup>. We sing that very hymn, *Vexilla Regis prodeunt*, during Holy Week and again on this feast, with one change in verse six: "in this glorious triumph!" rather than "in this Passion time."

Jesus died on the Cross looking like a criminal, seen as a failure, even by the apostles who fled leaving Mary and some others to watch while he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 21:1). This is the first verse of that psalm that was a prayer in Jewish worship for centuries and foretold all the suffering Jesus endured on that first Good Friday. The psalm continues on and becomes a prayer of exaltation, "I will tell of your name to my kin, and praise you in the midst of the assembly; You who fear the LORD, give him praise; all descendants of Jacob, give him glory; revere him, all you descendants of Israel. For he has never despised nor scorned the poverty of the poor. From him he has not

*Continued Page 2*

hidden his face, but he heard him whenever he cried. You are my praise in the great assembly. My vows I will pay before those who fear him" (Ps 21:23-26). "My vows" – recalling



what is written in the Letter to the Hebrews: "When Christ came into the world he said ... See, God, I have come to do you will, O God!" (Heb 10:9f).

The third verse of the *Vexilla Regis* proclaims,

Thus are fulfilled the things foretold  
in songs that faithful David sang,  
to tell the nations of the earth:

God reigns from the tree [or wood (of the Cross)].

Jesus reigns. He speaks to his Father of his great love of us, his mercy, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). He makes a promise to his fellow sufferer, the good thief, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23:43). From that throne he arranged that his mother be cared for and finally, after fulfilling all, he said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Lk 23:46) and breathed his last. Yes, he reigned from that tree!

The fifth verse of *Vexilla Regis* sings of this glorious mystery:

A blessed tree upon whose arms  
was raised the ransom of our world:  
A human body now the price  
that saved the prey from Satan's grasp.

My heart and soul are always touched and shocked that when Jesus conquers death and rises from the dead he is wounded. Those wounds did not diminish him though, as it had in his Passion time. He came and went as he willed. No one was able to follow him to see where he stayed or control when he could enter. He appeared in a room although the door was locked. His hands, feet and open side were the attestation that it was Jesus himself in their midst.

The sixth verse of *Vexilla Regis* quivers with exultation!

O Cross, hail, our only hope,  
In the glory of this triumph!

There are so many questions we could ask about God's plan, about his revealing to us the truth of his love, the way to

be reconciled and forgiven our sin and the life that Jesus opens to us through his fulfilling the will of the Father. One question I wonder about is why was Jesus not freed of the awful marks of that criminal death? Why not rise out of that tomb all glorious and shining as he was on the mount when he was transfigured before Peter, James and John? Why not flash across the whole of earth in a band of resurrection glory and reveal to all that he is the Son of God and Savior of the World!



But that's just it, isn't it? Jesus didn't come solely to open heaven for us. God's plan wasn't just that we be redeemed. His plan included that we be transformed. Jesus asks us to follow him: "If any wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mt 16:24).

That blaze of resurrection glory which might have blasted all who were on this globe at that moment into heaven was just not enough. God's vast creative love included all of us and more: not only that humanity be saved, but that human beings be transfigured to "Take my (Jesus') yoke upon you and learn from me." (Mt 11:29).

The wounds Jesus carries in his resurrected flesh are part of St Benedict's teaching on his chapter on humility. In the fourth step he digests this mystery of suffering that transforms us, unites us to the Lord who comforts us. "Comforts" in the word's full meaning of *strengthens!* And even more, becoming a "fort" around us to help and protect us so that "we may by patience participate in the passion of Christ; that we may deserve also to be partakers of his kingdom" (RB Prologue 50).

I have not met anyone who has not, is not, suffering somehow. It is a rare moment when "everything is fine." This, seems to me to be evidence of that immortality that God placed within us. This is not striving beyond ourselves, beyond what we are. It is suffering because we are more than what this world promises – it is understanding our fullest reality. And God allows suffering: *he doesn't will us to suffer for suffering's sake* but he allows it because of the transformation it accomplishes in our earthly lives and eternal souls. Our wounds will shine out in glory as part of the fullness of our human response to the Lord. This is a great mystery but one we have seen and sensed in those around us.

O Cross, hail, our only hope,  
In the glory of this triumph!



## THE GIVING TREE

Well, we're halfway through harvest time here at our orchard in Petersham and it has certainly been a season of highs & lows! One of our peach trees is taking a very natural & healthy year off from fruit production; while the other tree seems to have felt the need to compensate for its companion by giving us



nearly 1000 (175 lbs) of luscious peaches. Such bounty gives us the joy of being able to share God's material gifts with our brothers, neighbors, and retreatants - as we share the perhaps less visible fruits of our daily prayers with the wider world.

Our Colette pear tree, which was the victim of a voracious porcupine family a few years back, has rebounded beautifully - you might say she's 'giving it her all'. New branches are growing and well leafed, and she's even produced 14 pears this year. What a difference some extra TLC - and an electric fence - can make!

Rounding out our little orchard are a few apple varieties. The Honeycrisp apple tree seems to be coming of age & is bearing a bumper crop. Some of its apples are as big as softballs. In past years, this tree has given only a dozen or so fruit - but always as sweet as the name implies.

The largesse from the Honeycrisp will have to make up for the heavy heart with which I watched as our Gravenstein apple tree was cut down. This tree, planted in 2014, held a sentimental place for some sisters, as it marked the beginnings of the orchard. Disease got the better of it, despite hoeing and fertilizing, spraying and pruning. As the parable suggests, when all remedial measures have been 'fruitless,' more drastic action may be required.

Yet this tree still has gifts to give. We've kept the trunk & limbs. Perhaps we'll see them become a turned vessel from Sr Monica's workshop; perhaps chipped for Applewood smoking of Sr Emmanuel's next batch of Fontina. For the

community, it's a chance for a new beginning: we have space for... what? Perhaps a valiant little pear? Or an over-achieving peach?...  
SMhG



## Monastic Experience Weekend October 7th-9th, see our web site!

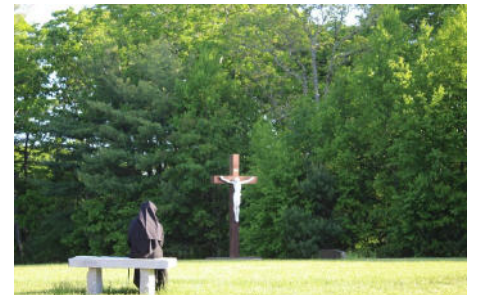


## HAPPENINGS

April 29 Rick Chaffee, an old friend who worked for us for many years, died after a prolonged illness. Rick was that rare workman who can tackle any job needed, or who knows who can do it, and everywhere we look on our property - stairs, raised garden beds, sidewalks, windows - we are reminded of his help over the years.



For the month of May in honor of Our Lady we added two invocations to the litany we've been singing at meals for peace for Ukraine: Our Lady the Indestructible Wall (a Ukrainian devotion), and Our Lady of Kazan.



May 13 Following the call of the United States bishops our community joined the day of fasting and prayer for Life.

May 24 About 50 bags of salt arrived for the water system in the basement. Steve created a slide to save our backs!  
May 30 Abbot





Anselm of Pluscarden, who was visiting us, joined us for our Memorial Day picnic.



June 10-12 Four wonderful young women participated in our Summer Monastic Experience Weekend.

June 19 The Solemnity of Corpus Christi, with Adoration from the end of Mass until Vespers.



June 27-July 2 Sister Emmanuel and Sister Maria Isabel attended the 33rd Monastic Institute at St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minn.



Sr Mauela Scheiba, OSB, Fr Luke Dysinger, OSB, and Fr Michael Casey, OCSO were the speakers.

July 4th As we were coming over to Sext right before our Fourth of July picnic, we were met by a sign: one of the sisters had tested positive for COVID. There went the picnic! We were back to masks and a simplified form of the Divine Office prayed in our house chapel, although we were able to attend Mass in church. Thankfully, no one else caught it.



July 6-9 Sr. Lynn McKenzie, OSB, of Sacred Heart Monastery in Cullman, Ala., our canon lawyer friend, visited to help us with our new constitutions. Sr. Scholastika Häring, OSB, of the Abbey of St. Scholastica, Dinklage, Germany, had generously shared their approved constitutions, enormously lessening our labors by giving us a basis for our own. Sr. Mary Frances and Sr. Emmanuel had worked at proofreading them and when Sr. Lynn arrived, intensive sessions with her finalized the work.

July 21 The constitutions were mailed to Rome for approval, completing a work begun in 2018.



August 1 Christine, a dear friend, came for the day to give our sisters extra training in their new venture of soapmaking.

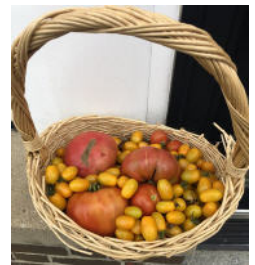
August 14 For the first time, the sisters went to our brothers' house for Sunday recreation. Until now, it's been held at our house, but with their new addition



finished, they have a room large enough to hold both communities. We'll alternate Sundays from now on.



Despite extremely dry weather and incursions from groundhogs and porcupines, the gardens and fruit trees have yielded an abundant harvest. One morning's pick!



Since our last newsletter we have rehabbed a bathroom, had heating work done that included asbestos removal, replaced a washing machine and had traps put into the old steam radiators!

The guesthouse has seen an uptick in numbers, including groups, although we're still proceeding slowly.

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## THE SPACE BETWEEN THE WORDS

Earlier this summer, Sr. Maria Isabel and I traveled to St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn. to attend conferences sponsored by the 33<sup>rd</sup> Monastic Institute. While the presentations were very edifying and bolstered our ongoing formation, I found myself gravitating toward the quiet wisdom of the elderly Benedictine monks residing at the college, observing their understated ways and welcoming opportunities for conversation.

One evening at a social event sponsored by St. John's, a small-framed monk bent by many years came to join our group. Earlier that day, I had been reveling in the beautiful liturgy that the monks prayed on campus, and remarked to him how wonderful it was. He responded thoughtfully, "Yes... and it's not so much the words of the psalms themselves as the space between the words." The blueberries on my plate began to slide about as I realized the profundity of his statement. Regaining control of the berries, I nodded in quiet affirmation.

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Astronomers have been making headlines this year with the first photographs of our galaxy's black hole using the Event Horizon Telescope. Interestingly, these images are records of a mysterious astronomical entity that doesn't emit any light; the nature of the hole's gravitational field keeps the very object hidden from view. But scientists mathematically proved—and have now empirically proved—that they exist, even if we are unable to see them directly. Instead, we see the light that is being sucked beyond the "event horizon"—the point of no return that encircles the hole. In short, we see not the thing itself, but its visible effect.

I found myself marveling at the wise monk's words in light of these and innumerable other scientific discoveries.



merable other scientific discoveries. In the liturgy, he had experienced that "the space between the words", the seeming "void" was not without its content. In fact, it was the very place in which to make contact with the living God, with reality itself. The words of the prayers themselves, the effect of the "First Cause", provide the context for the Divine Presence—the context in which to perceive the invisible. Rather than simply think *about* God, he was able to understand "space" or silence as a divine medium, so as to open himself to a vital, life-giving spiritual engagement.

Much like our scientific predecessors whose instruments were too weak to perceive certain astronomical phenomena, oftentimes our spiritual capacities go either undiscovered or underdeveloped to view the things of God. Faith is a kind of perception, an enabling of spiritual sight. It opens a person to an invisible reality that exists regardless of the human experience, which can be fine-tuned by grace to receive "data" that was formerly beyond the natural spectrum. Perhaps faith could be understood as our Event Horizon Telescope, used to know what was once unknowable, connecting us to the eternal God.

Monasteries hold a unique place in the universe. A Benedictine abbot once remarked: "We are to be still points in a world that passes around us." Similarly, the Carthusian motto is: *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*, or "The cross is steady while the world turns." A monastery, or any place of prayer, can act paradoxically as the "populated void"—a place of peace and silence in which to encounter God. Endless streams of words—exterior or interior—can cloud a sense of the spiritual, but can be regained with a shift in consciousness that is offered to us in quiet places. Leaning into faith, "the peace of God, which transcends understanding, will guard [our] hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7). Then we can peer beyond our own "event horizon" where time stops and infinity begins.

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We hold you in our prayers  
always!  
Our gift to you is to remember  
your beloved dead with a  
Novena of Masses ending on  
November 2nd.

## God's Gift of Nature Steadily Unfolds No Matter the News.

Nature keeps it's round of glory around us. The flowers, the gardens, the sounds from peepers, Mourning Doves, crows, big old bull frogs and so much more. Some birds that make their stop each year at our bird feeders – like this Indigo Bunting – two days and it is gone. The junior Cooper Hawk that landed near the cloister, one of the bears that waddled on our patio and the cute little destructive porcupine. All these animals coming out of hiding at the same time each year – that mysterious inner life that urges them on like that in this Monarch caterpillar!

All this goes on despite the wars, divisions, shootings, conspiracies, pandemics. God is holding all. He is here waiting, doing, listening and providing. The Divine Office is like this. It continues on year after year with the Psalms, Scripture and Seasons of the Church Year. We flip our Choir books from page 182 on Saturday morning to page 21 on Saturday evening Vespers year after year. No matter the news. GOD IS. GOD KNOWS. GOD WILL HELP US THROUGH!

