FINALLY ALL TOGETHER

I remember witnessing the vows of one of the monks here at St Mary’s Monastery. The presiding abbot asked a question of the junior just before the ceremony: “Are you ready to die here?” I have to tell you I still remember my inner response, “What?!”

St Benedict does say in Chapter 58 (On the procedure of receiving brothers), “One newly arriving to this way of life is not to be granted an easy entrance.” But isn’t talking about death on the day you make your vows forever to God and the community a little too much? Maybe not. Isn’t there a well-known phrase in the traditional marriage vow that says, “Until death do us part?” A few verses further in that same chapter, St Benedict continues, “If he promises perseverance in his stability … if, having deliberated within himself, he promises to keep everything … he is to be received into the community knowing that the law of the Rule establishes that from that day he is no longer free to depart from the monastery nor remove his neck from beneath the yoke of the Rule which after such prolonged deliberation he was free to either refuse or to accept. The one being received is to make in the oratory before all a promise of his stability, his faithfulness to the way of life, and obedience. This is done before God and his saints” (RB 58:9ff). And so begins the committed life of a nun or monk in the “school of the Lord’s service” (RB Prol 45).

In the Prologue of the Rule, just following his speaking of the “school” of the Lord he speaks about graduation day. Graduation is not about some career within the monastery, the Church or the surrounding town. “Graduate” comes from the Latin “gradus” which means “step”. Isn’t taking steps walking? It is that forward movement to which St Benedict invites us when we are just beginning in the way, “advancing in the way of life and faith” so that “our hearts open wide, and we run with unspeakable sweetness of love on the path of God’s commandments. So that, never departing from his guidance, but persevering in his teaching in the monastery until death, we may by patience participate in the passion of Christ; that we may deserve also to be partakers of his kingdom. Amen” (RB Prol 49-50). I guess asking that question of the newly
professed, “are you ready to die here” wasn’t actually shocking. It was simply asking what St Benedict states several times in his Rule. He wants us heading in the direction of eternity from the start, actually saying in RB 4:46-47, “to desire eternal life with all spiritual ardent yearning, to daily keep death before one’s eyes.”

St Scholastica Priory and St Mary’s Monastery moved to Petersham in 1985. From the first day of our arrival we planned to have here a cemetery for our brothers and sisters who “persevered through patience,” preferring nothing to the love of Christ” (RB 4:21), and who died in the monastery. Finally this is happening! On September 26th, the remains of eight nuns and two monks will be interred in our new cemetery. It is placed in the area where first church stood, just behind the grey cloister gates. In the spring, a twelve-foot cross will be erected in the midst of the graves.

The six sisters who died at our daughter house in Louisiana, Our Lady Queen Monastery, will be among the ten be buried here. All of these sisters, including our own Sr Mary Herbert, had lived as active Benedictine sisters for many years prior to their life in Tickfaw, LA. Our Lady Queen Monastery had roots from 1970, but the actual monastery complex was finally built in 1984. These sisters wanted to join a Benedictine congregation characterized by a simple monastic life, and that is what brought them to us. In 1990 they became a daughter house of St Scholastica Priory, and they all made solemn vows. Mother Mary Clare visited them many times over those years. God’s sweet touch is shown in that the Tickfaw sisters moved into their newly built monastery on Antioch Road on September 26th, 1984, and on that very day in this year of our Lord 2017 they will be interred here in our new cemetery at St Scholastica’s.

Mother Mary Clare Vincent led our community in the 1970s to the Benedictine family. Our move to Petersham flowed out of the permission we received from Rome to make solemn vows and elect our first prioress, who was, of course, Mother Mary Clare. Her love of God, faith, teaching, welcoming smile and courage brought us to where we are today.

Fr Cyril Karam founded St Mary’s Monastery in 1985 with the help of Br Stanislaus Ribera Faig, with whom he had lived religious life for many years in Still River, Massachusetts. His great wisdom of mind and soul led his community to become a daughter house of Pluscarden Abbey, Scotland. Only God knew that this would be vital to St. Mary’s existence when Br Stanislaus died in 1989 and Fr Cyril only eight months later.

These three pillars of our communities are buried in the Petersham Town Cemetery. A fourth pillar is also buried there: Sr Mary Herbert Walsh, who with heroic enthusiasm chose to move here from Louisiana, and died here only months short of her ninety-ninth birthday in 2014. All four will be moved here on the 26th of September.

May our sisters and brothers who have persevered in “his teaching in the monastery until death” and who are now “partakers of His kingdom.” (RB Prol 50) pray for us!
Would you consider remembering us in your will or charitable remainder trust? Our legal title is: St. Scholastica Priory, Inc. Our tax I.D. # is 222-617-059.
Our deepest thanks are for those who have so lovingly cared for our little cemetery in Tickfaw since 2009, when the community moved to Massachusetts. The former monastery is now a beautiful place for retreats, called Our Lady of the Way Spiritual Life Center. Go for a retreat! http://www.ourladyoftheway.org

And our heartfelt thanks also to Greg Hill of McKreely’s Funeral Home, who did everything necessary to bring our sisters from the cemetery there to Petersham. We are so grateful.

Our senior postulant, Vivian Webster, has a particular love for walking in the woods, and enjoys exploring our many acres of woodlands. On her travels one day, she discovered blueberry bushes! So in the month of July we had plenty of berries—including those generously donated by friends—to bless our kitchen. Vivian will be clothed as a novice soon!

Elena Ainley entered as a postulant on July 1st! She had a beautiful send-off by her parents, two siblings and a few friends, who came to share a meal with the sisters on that blessed day. One month later, on August 1st, our third postulant, Kathryn Gagnon, came to join our community. She was already an oblate of St. Scholastica Priory and a regular Sunday Mass attendant, so she feels right at home in the midst of us!

Every year on August 22nd, we honor Our Lady, Queen of Heaven in a special way, as patron of Our Lady Queen Monastery in Tickfaw, Louisiana. This year Vivian, Elena and Kate were given the task of decorating our statue of Our Lady outside the church for our annual candlelit hymn sung after Compline. Sr. Maria Isabel, our Junior and resident events photographer, was happy to capture the festivities on camera. Sub tuum above is the oldest prayer to Mary.

We want to introduce you to our postulants and ask you to pray for them! They are praying for you!

Under thy protection we seek refuge,
O Holy Mother of God;

In our needs, despise not our petitions,