

It's What We Do

A collection of stories about the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand, Indiana | 2012



Spreading the
Gospel like fire

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Learning to
trust God —
through Spain,
pain, rain

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Welcome to the second annual edition of *It's What We Do*, devoted entirely to what the sisters are up to, and how they are touching the minds, hearts, and souls of all those they serve.

You'll read how some mothers tear up when thinking of how a sister influences their children. How another sister has infused new enthusiasm into a parish. How two sisters taught a spirituality class like no other in a lay ministry degree program.

You'll see how the sisters can so uniquely comfort those in need. You'll see how they help others in far-away places like Peru and Guatemala. And how one learned to trust God even more during a pilgrimage in Spain.

You'll hear what others say about the ways sisters help people. It's candid, refreshing, and reassuring.

So enjoy your time with this edition. And to keep up with what the sisters are doing, please regularly visit our website, www.thedome.org.



On the cover: Sister Louise Laroche (center) gets her team fired up before "Fun Day" activities at Holy Family School in Jasper, Indiana.

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Sister Louise: Godmother and guide

Some mothers admittedly tear up when reflecting on how Sister Louise Laroche influences their children.

Sister Louise, a religion teacher for grades K-8 at Holy Family School in Jasper, Indiana, can connect with students in ways only a Benedictine sister can.

Tara Eckman, who has three sons in Sister Louise's religion classes, wrote in an email, "She is truly the heart of our school (and even typing that makes me well up with tears!)"

Vickie Beckman, who had two children graduate from the school, said in a phone interview, "I can actually see the light of Christ in Sister Louise's eyes. Her eyes twinkle when she talks about God. It's so evident to me, and it's so rare. You know everything will be fine.

"You know her faith is number one in her life. There are so few people you see that truly live their faith. It's not a question with her."

She paused, and her voice caught as she said, "I tear up when I talk about her."

Vickie was amazed that her son, as a grade school boy, shared things with Sister Louise in confidence.

"She is totally accessible to kids. That makes a difference. She knows the ways of the world, she's been through so much, she understands peer pressure, she just gets it. She knows the guidance to give you to get through anything. Sister Louise is like a security blanket for Holy Family."

Eckman wrote that "Sister Louise is certainly at the top of that list" as to why her husband and her send their boys to Holy Family.

Above: Sister Louise Laroche huddles with 6th grade students to discuss an answer to a problem posed during her Religion class at Holy Family School in Jasper, Indiana.

"I can't think of anyone better to help us raise the boys into men of character and faith," wrote Tara, a former student of Sister Louise. "Children of all ages respond to Sister Louise in such a beautiful way. She embodies Jesus's immense and unconditional love for them, and they are drawn to her."

"She brings our faith alive in a very relevant way for them."

Tara's son, Leo, 6, said, "Sister Louise makes learning about Religion and the Bible fun."

Leo is one of Holy Family's 168 students. Sister Louise knows them all, by name. It's the ultimate indication of how much she cares about them individually.

"What is rewarding is giving these children the Eucharist, or a blessing, and saying each one of their names," says Sister Louise. "The Body of Christ, Grace; God loves you very much, Sam,' and seeing God in them."

Her eyes twinkled as she spoke. She feels like a God-mother to all of them. Not having a homeroom of her own at the school, they are all her children.

But everything is not eternally rosy during the school day. That's when being a Benedictine sister really helps.

"I have students that are very difficult to love sometimes," she admits. "So I pray, 'God, please help me love them the way that God and their parents love them. There is something good in that child, just guide me into doing the right thing for that child.' If I have a bad day, or I'm worried about a student, I bring it to prayer. It's so much a part of who I am, and I want to share the gift of prayer with my students."

Indeed, she practices the prayer form *Lectio Divina*, and meditation, with the students. And they latch on. It does help deal with the inevitable disciplinary problems and helps students to go deeper. She is adept at having open, meaningful conversations with students, ones that dig out the roots of problems and unearth possible solutions.

Regarding discipline, she tells her students, "Your parents and I are not the enemies here. If we are taking the time to discipline you it's because we love and care for you deeply.' Deep down they know it. Parents need all the help they can get these days, and I am there for them."

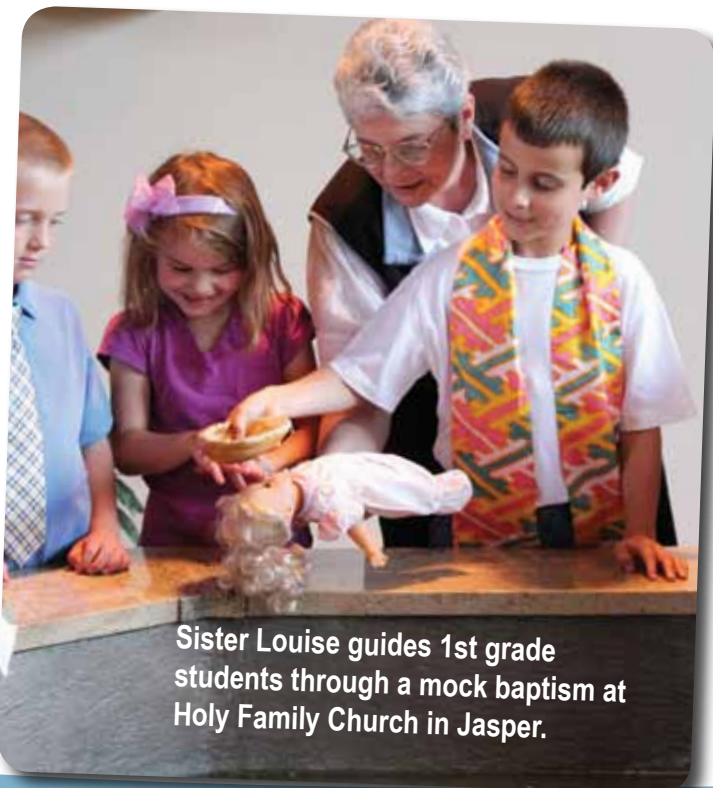
That caring extends to Sister Louise taking time to create a curriculum, and activities, that are hits with students.

She's taught at Holy Family for 23 years, with a two-year leave to care for her parents from 2008-2010. She took advantage of that time to fashion a more meaningful curriculum for students.

"I'd been teaching religion for a long time, but never felt the kids were making connections. You talk about Moses, and St. Paul, but students think it all happened about the same time."

So she put a Bible time line, and a church history time line, on the bulletin board. She then presented her textbook material in those time lines. It's much easier for students to make the connections now, and much less frustrating for Sister Louise.

Holy Family Principal Sally Sternberg says, "She has a wonderful way of working everything together – what the kids know, what the church teaches, and what the Bible teaches. She has a gift."



Sister Louise guides 1st grade students through a mock baptism at Holy Family Church in Jasper.

"A lay teacher would go on the religion book, and that's that. They don't have the depth of knowledge that Sister Louise has. She makes religion come alive for students. We reap the benefits of her being a sister."

"She also teaches students how to be compassionate, and is more than ready to meet with them on personal and peer conflicts. She helps them reach a compromise."

Sister Louise continually injects wrinkles into her lessons that keep the kids engaged. It could be the song about the apostles that children keep singing at home, and soon the whole family is belting out the tune. Or she'll spy the popular clothes from GAP the students are wearing, and she ties them right into religion, saying it means "God Answers Prayers." It's just part of her trying to find God in everything.

She was particularly creative during Holy Week, setting up stations in the gym where students experienced various parts of the Way of the Cross. They could gently touch a crown of thorns, try a taste of vinegar, or hammer a nail into a cross while thinking of a sin they were sorry for. Or they could write something they wanted to thank Jesus for, or write the distractions that keep them from being closer to God. Fellow teachers told her afterward of students sharing their thoughts on how this experience touched them.

She says she has her dream job as a religious – being able to impart her life to others. And she particularly loves what she's doing "because we're all learning and growing in the knowledge and love of God together."

"What better job can you have than being Godmother to so many children, helping them to being the person God created them to be," says Sister Louise. "I teach children not to make a living but to make a life on our way to eternal life. I tell them when Jesus died on the cross, he gave us heaven, and now our task is to keep heaven by choosing heaven every day and to bring heaven to others."

The joys of her ministry are many. From the random hugs given her by the little children at any time of the school day, to the serious conversations with older students that



Sister Louise Laroche (second from right) cheers on her team during a kickball game at Holy Family School's "Fun Day."

spell a difference in their lives. There's the occasional note from a long-ago student thanking her. Or seeing kids being enthused about their relationship with God. Or seeing kids just being kind to one another, bringing heaven here on earth.

There's the mother of an 8th grade boy who told Sister Louise last spring that her son was praying privately with his sister. The mother told her, 'You have a great influence on those kids.' Another mother said her child remarked, 'I feel holier, I'm making better decisions.'

"These children have a spirituality," says Sister Louise, "and they're thirsting to know more. You can feel it." Her 4th graders clamored for more meditation time last year, proclaiming how peaceful they felt. In a world perpetually on fast forward, it was a welcome time to reflect.

She tells of a former student who visited her, admitting that now he realizes how much she cared about him and his classmates. Others will also tell her how she made a difference in their lives.

Enough of a difference to bring tears to some people's eyes. ■



Sister Kim Mandelkow enjoys a lighter moment at her adult choir practice at Sts. Joseph and Paul Church in Owensboro, Kentucky.

Spreading the Gospel like fire

Sister Kim Mandelkow loves seeing a parish “on fire” – people eagerly participating in church activities, singing their hearts out, visibly excited, and seriously plugged in to the liturgy.

That’s happening more and more at Sts. Joseph and Paul Catholic Church in Owensboro, Kentucky.

One might say that Sister Kim, as the parish’s minister of music and liturgy, lit the match.

Long-time parishioner Sue Mahoney has no doubt. “That little dynamo Sister Kim has lit a fire in our stove,” she says. “Her enthusiasm and dedication is there all the time. I am blessed to have her in my life. She has a special place in my heart.”

One of Sister Kim’s most touching breakthroughs was with Sue’s special needs granddaughter, Jacqueline, 19, who has a developmental disability. Jacqueline has a lovely

singing voice, but could never be convinced to sing at mass. Until Sister Kim came along.

Jacqueline also loves to be sung to. Richly-voiced Sister Kim did so immediately, and a fast friendship formed. Recently, the two sang “Amazing Grace” together as a prelude to mass. The church audience, quite aware of Jacqueline’s autism, knew what a special moment it was. Their spontaneous eruption into heartfelt applause spoke volumes.

Father Carl McCarthy said of the moment, “Sister Kim shows that we all have talents, and that music helps unify hearts for our common goal of salvation. Their song together was truly worship and prayer, giving glory and praise to God.”

Sister Kim oversees the parish’s entire liturgical life, although she sees it as “a position of spreading the Gospel, much more than just directing the program.”

“She helps us worship God in a meaningful, respectful way”

And spreading the Gospel she has — Sister Kim started a praying of the Liturgy of the Hours in Advent, has the youth choir singing monthly at mass instead of just at Christmas and Easter, and she has renewed enthusiasm and about doubled membership in the adult choir.

“The choirs are starting to create a lot of energy,” she says. A recent adult choir practice revealed the reason.

Sister Kim was near perpetual motion, directing, cajoling, encouraging, animatedly playing the piano, singing, smiling, and laughing. The practice, though serious, was far from tedious or drudgery. The joy showed when choir members broke out in spontaneous singing during one lull.

“I love it, I love it!” Sister Kim responded. And the choir loves her right back. Such fire is catching. Some have jokingly asked her when she’s going to play the piano with her feet. If she felt that would further help people hear the word of God, and better sing the word of God in music, she’d probably do it.

Her feet are plenty occupied, though, with her zest for physical fitness. She has completed two marathons in the past year. She works out regularly at a gym near the parish. And she routinely puts in long hours at her job.

But such visibility is a part of her ministry that Sister Kim enjoys.

“Parishioners see me, 32 years old, out among the people, and I’m a sister,” she says. “People see this new side of religious life. They see me doing what I love to do, ministering liturgy and music, accompanying masses, working out in a gym, just living my vocation, being a witness to our community and to the Benedictine way of life, and they say, ‘yeah, I could do that.’ That’s my hope, that people see that.”

She need not worry that people have noticed.

“She helps us worship God in a meaningful, respectful way,” says Father Carl. “We try to reach out to the poor, the lost, those trying to find Christ and meaning in their life. She uses music that reflects our mission. Music is an essential tool that helps us pray.”

“Sister Kim is a great teacher, too, through the choir, of why we do things, and of what Scripture says. It’s more than singing a song. She’s successful because she’s an enthusiastic soul. That attracts people to her.”

Adult choir member Rose Roberts readily attests to Sister Kim’s musical ability. “She’s brought the church alive with her talents, and she’s brought the church alive for senior citizens. I am so thrilled she’s here.”

Rose was also along when Sister Kim took the choir to sing at a nearby home for the developmentally disabled at Christmas. “It was such an enlightening trip,” says Rose. “Sister Kim was bouncing all over with the residents, singing and taking requests. It was such a treat for them because we came into their home. It was very touching.”

Sister Kim feels that God answered her prayers when she landed in the Owensboro parish.

“It’s like God had this in store for me,” she says. “I’ve been able to use my gifts to the fullest, and to be in a position that challenges me, not only academically, spiritually, and musically, but I’m being pushed to improve every day. It’s wonderful. I love that part of it.”

Sister Kim Mandelkow energetically directs an adult choir practice.



She heavily credits the encouragement of her Benedictine community and deanery.

“Knowing I have their support keeps me going. Because I’m not just working here for me, I’m working for them, and I’m working for all of us. The gift and the support of the community help me do this.”

There’s also a deeply sympathetic, consoling side to Sister Kim. She talks of the humbling experience of distributing ashes to nursing home residents on Ash Wednesday.

She asked one lady what she wanted her to pray for. The lady said her husband had died, she really missed him, and she was having a hard transition into the nursing home. She asked Sister Kim to just sing to her.

“And so I sang ‘Amazing Grace’ to her,” says Sister Kim. “We were both in tears. It was just one of those powerful moments.”

Another moment that she lives for is seeing someone grow in their faith. After her prayer to open choir practice, Sister Kim regularly asks for any thoughts about the prayer.

“Sometimes, somebody will share a comment, and it’s so profound,” she says. “That helps me to grow in my faith, and encourages everybody else, too. It’s that growth, and that sharing of faith life, that absolutely gives me energy.”

As much as a livewire that Sister Kim is, she is as serious as can be when talking about the Benedictine sisters’ devotion to liturgy. She even refers to it as “liturgical passion,” with a steadfast expression and clenched fists.

“I try to make our liturgies here as prayerful, as reverent, and as peaceful, as the liturgies at the monastery in Ferdinand. We don’t always hit it out of the ballpark,” she says, laughing. “But sometimes we do.”

And often enough that one family gave her a musical angel statue with a card that stated, “This angel reminds me of the one we have at Sts. Joe and Paul, You. I hope you enjoy.”

Periodically, after the closing song at a mass, the congregation will break out in applause. Seriously.

“Before mass, I always pray to God to help us sing your praises,” says Sister Kim. “Because it’s more than just entertaining, it’s more than performing. You’re actually leading prayer, you’re leading music, you’re spreading the Word of God.”

Like wildfire. ■

Sisters whack home run at Saint Meinrad spirituality class



Sister Maria Tasto

When the monk slated to teach the spirituality class recently in the lay ministry degree program at Saint Meinrad (Ind.) Seminary and School of Theology was unable to do so, Sisters Maria Tasto and Kathryn Huber stepped in as pinch-hit instructors.

According to Kyle Kramer, director of lay degree programs, the course evaluations submitted by 11 students indicated the sisters “hit it out of the park.”

“This was the best class I have taken at Saint Meinrad,” wrote a post graduate who has taken six more classes since a 2001 graduation. “Both instructors and the class dynamics -- time in a small group, sharing, praying as a group -- all added up to a truly ‘transforming’ experience.”

Sister Maria taught all six conferences of her presentation “A Transformed Life,” as well as Centering Prayer and Lectio Divina. Sister Kathy talked about spirituality and the different stages of life.

Among the other comments:

“Only superlatives for this class. Sister Maria and Sister Kathy were marvelous instructors. One of the best classes I’ve had at Saint Meinrad. Should be a regular course!”

“... will continue to help me develop my relationship with God and share His love with others.”

“We truly formed a Christian community in our meeting. I credit Sister Kathy and Sister Maria for fostering that kind of ‘love through prayer’ that our class had become. Several other students thought our class had transformed into something quite spiritual. It was a joy and wonder to watch.”

“Sister Kathy and Sister Maria, you both have such gentle spirits and it is obvious that you are both women of prayer. You not only pushed us spiritually, you pushed us intellectually. I appreciated that.”

“Most helpful: the focus on contemplative prayer, the small group discussions, having women for instructors for the first time. Great course – should be required!”

“Most helpful: the mentorship and guidance of master instructors who knew the material from the inside.”


“It is a great balance to all the academic we usually concentrate on.”

“The sisters brought a wealth of personal and professional experience and were a delight to learn with.”

“The sisters are exceptional teachers, guides, and mentors. The synergy they exhibited, actually the love and support they have for each other, spilled over to all of us and helped us to help each other.” ■



Sister Kathryn Huber

A photograph of Sister Maura Beckman, an elderly woman with short, curly grey hair and glasses. She is wearing a light-colored collared shirt under a grey cardigan. A name tag is pinned to her left chest. She is standing behind a wooden podium, holding an open red Bible with both hands. In the background, a crucifix is visible on the wall.

Sister Maura Beckman, a chaplain at Memorial Hospital and Health Care Center in Jasper, Indiana, reads from the Bible in the hospital chapel during a prayer service.

Sister Maura: hospital's spiritual instrument

Leah Hayworth remembers well how Sister Maura Beckman stood by her that agonizing 2010 day when her husband, Doug, was suffering through a rupturing aneurism in the emergency room at Memorial Hospital and Health Care Center in Jasper.

"Sister Maura was just a rock," said Leah. "The prayer she said with us was very spiritual, very personal, real comforting."

But what Sister Maura, the hospital chaplain, did next left the biggest impression.

As Doug was transferred to a helicopter to be flown out for further care, Sister Maura walked with Leah to her car.

"That was so neat, a real grace to walk me to my car so I wouldn't be by myself, watching that copter go off and not knowing what would happen to my husband," said Leah. "It might sound like a small thing, but her having the wherewithal to be there was a blessing for me."

Leah, who is supervisor of rehabilitative services at Southern Hills Counseling Center in Jasper, couldn't emphasize enough how comforting it was that Sister Maura was there.

Sister Maura has been "there" for thousands of patients and their concerned families for 21 years at the Jasper hospital.

She provides spiritual and emotional support as only a Benedictine can. Because Sister Maura covers the intensive care, post-surgical, and pediatrics units, and can be called at any time to the emergency room, that means a lot of listening, a lot of gentle understanding to calm people under severe stress, and the leading of a lot of prayer.

Margie Bell, a nurse who is coordinator of hospitalist service, sets up many patient and family conferences to discuss tough medical situations. She automatically includes Sister Maura.

"We see really sick people, and Sister Maura brings something the rest of us can't, spirituality," said Margie. "I can't imagine doing the family conferences without her. She's extremely valuable to us with critical patients and families who are beside themselves. She's so calming, so practical, and so doggone kind."

So it's no surprise Sister Maura won the prestigious Little Company of Mary award in 2010, presented to the employee that best demonstrates the hospital's mission and core values through their daily work.

She's a natural as a hospital chaplain, celebrating her 60th year as a Benedictine this year, and having served as a registered nurse for 37 years before joining Memorial Hospital in 1991 as director of pastoral care.

"But being a hospital chaplain is really what I wanted to do," said Sister Maura. "As a nurse, I realized there were many spiritual needs that were not being met. It's being present to people, really hearing where they are and what their needs are."

She can visit up to about 20 patients a day, and each one is special to her. She pulls up a chair to get close and at eye level, then trusts in God to help her develop a relationship with the patient.

"The Benedictine way of life, our community life, and community prayer are what gives me the energy to do what I do. I don't think somebody can be a chaplain without having a very strong spirituality."

Sister Maura enjoys helping people discover resources within themselves to cope with their struggles. And she finds it very rewarding, and very important, to help people talk to their loved ones approaching the end of life – motivating them to open up on what they want to share, and what they hope the last days will be like for all involved.

"I know my presence is important, and some of the things I say are, but it's helping them come to an understanding

and acceptance of what's going on for them. There's a wholeness there. When I work with those grieving, I learn a lot, too. It's a special gift when people share their lives with you."

Before her husband, Earl, died recently, Sylvia Metzger was with Sister Maura daily for several weeks.

"Just feeling her presence, she brought calmness, that's what I appreciated the most," said Sylvia. "I knew she was praying for us. Even after I went home, she called me several times. She has a very reassuring attitude."

Others at the hospital say much the same.

Anne Steffe, a clinical nurse in the intensive care unit, said, "In an emergency, she is so compassionate and reassuring. In my follow-up calls to patients, many mention how she helped them cope spiritually, how they really enjoyed her, and how she listened."

Another nurse, Leigh Ann Jochum, noted how Sister Maura "will sit at a patient's bedside, hold hands, and is so easy to talk to."

Director of Pastoral Care Mike Jones said simply, "She is a strength at the hospital."

Family members of patients often tell her she made letting go of their loved one "so much easier."

To Sister Maura, "the most important thing is that God uses me as an instrument to help people spiritually, to help them get through their troubles."

"It's humbling to know God can use me."

She smiles.

"I can't believe God would pick someone like me."

But everybody who meets her knows why. ■



Sister Mary Judith Fleig (right) visits with Rosa Cana. When Sister Mary Judith was superior of the monastery in Guatemala, Rosa lived in the monastery after her best friend was burned to death during the genocide of that country's civil war.

A visit back to Guatemala's holy ground

Sister Mary Judith Fleig served the poor in Guatemala during some of the darkest, scariest years in that Central American country's history. Yet it will always have a warm spot in her heart.

As superior at the Ferdinand Benedictines' monastery in Coban, she was a natural suspect of the government military forces in Guatemala's 36-year Civil War. Being a part of the Catholic Church made her even more of a possible target.

She was in Guatemala from 1971 to 1998, and served as monastery superior from 1974 to 1994. That was in the midst of a civil war between the government and various rebel groups. The poor were caught in the middle of this struggle. Since the Benedictine sisters went to Coban primarily to help the poor and establish a native Benedictine community, they were automatically viewed by the government as being on the other side.

Over 200,000 were killed during the war, many as part of a military genocide. Included were priests and missionaries, executed simply because they were helping the poor in impoverished parishes.

Sister Mary Judith knew some of them personally.

So it's no wonder that while she talked about the joy of her recent one-week trip back to Guatemala, her eyes still moistened as she said, "To me, it was a true gift, I get a little emotional, just to put my feet on holy ground. I consider Guatemala very holy ground because there were many martyrs in Guatemala because of the civil war and strife while I was there. Many priests, catechists, women and children were killed. There were massacres just an hour away from our monastery.

"But the priests were teaching Jesus' message, they weren't guerrillas. But the government didn't like them standing by the poor. The government wanted to keep the poor in a state of oppression. The church was very valiant in those times, and denounced such atrocities."

The trip back to Guatemala was a gift to Sister Mary Judith from her three sisters and their husbands – Judy and Charlie Luebbehusen, Linda and Vic Begle, and Margie and Earl Jerger. They all went as part of a Mission Awareness trip through the Christian Foundation for Children and Aging. Each of the three married couples financially supports a Guatemalan child's education, at a minimum of \$30 a month, through the foundation.

"I felt like I was back home again, to some extent," said Sister Mary Judith, her eyes tearing up once more. "I dreamt as a child to be a volunteer at a foreign mission." Her Guatemala ministry was a dream come true.

Although the civil war ended in the 1990s, Guatemala still has drug trafficking and gang-induced violence. Sister Mary Judith's group had two police escorts provided by Guatemalan tourism during their stay.

During her recent visit, Sister Mary Judith was reunited with a dear friend, Rosa Cana. Rosa's best friend had been burned to death by Guatemalan military forces in the late 1970s. Fearing for Rosa's life, a priest familiar to the Benedictines asked Sister Mary Judith if their monastery could give Rosa a place to live.

It was a risky move at the time. But Sister Mary Judith didn't hesitate in saying yes.

"It was the only Christian thing to do," she says. "We were there for the poor. Whatever their needs were, we tried to meet them. If we had been too afraid of the situation, it would have stifled us. We simply trusted in God."

Rosa lived in the monastery for five years. Her experience of living with the sisters was very enriching for everyone.

Many catechists and others also stayed overnight in the Coban monastery at various times. That, too, could have been risky, but Sister Mary Judith said "we thought it was the right thing to do."

She said the military presence in the country was obvious at the time. Anyone affiliated with the church was suspect. But no one at the monastery was ever questioned. Although the community felt in danger, they never felt in imminent danger.

Today, Sister Mary Judith works in Hispanic ministry as an English teacher at the Guadalupe Center in Huntingburg, Indiana, and as an English/Spanish translator in the court system in Jasper, Indiana. But a large piece of her heart, and many of her thoughts, will always be in Guatemala.

"Guatemala is an ideal place to live the Benedictine way of life because the Guatemalans are so prayer oriented and community oriented," she says. "God is so much a part of their life. I think it's partly because of the suffering they experience. But at the same time, they have deep faith and joy. And they showed it during our trip. They gave us far more than we could ever give to them."

The visit renewed her belief in the Guatemalan people's deep faith and hospitality.

"Everywhere we went, we were greeted with 'mi casa es su casa,' my house is your house. They performed typical dances for us and always served us a meal.

"Those mission years are still there with me. Guatemala is still very much a part of my life."

Her sister, Judy Luebbehusen, readily noticed her strong attachment on the trip.

"When we attended mass, it was very emotional for her," said Judy. "She always said, 'these are my people.'" ■

Sisters and people learn from each other in Peru

Sure, the lifestyle is a little different in Peru than in the United States.

Cold showers are common in many areas. Sometimes the water doesn't work at all. Some villages are unreachable by car, or even by bicycle, so you walk. Living room furniture might be a lawn chair or two. Some entire families use just one bed.

But for the Sisters of St. Benedict who are serving the local people, much of their ministry is the same as in the U.S. They help the poor and needy as best they can. Or work patiently with school children struggling to understand math. Or help the journey of those of strong faith, or those of lesser faith looking for more.

Sister Kathy Cash, a teacher at Trinity High School in Louisville, completely loved her recent stay there.

Sister Kathy admits she has "never been totally comfortable with living completely in a U.S. frame of mind."

Even as a child, she yearned to have the chance to live and work outside the friendly and familiar confines of the

U.S. So she jumped at the chance recently to spend nearly five weeks living and working at the monastery operated in Peru by nine Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand.

"I know there are places in the world completely different than the U.S., culturally, monetarily, and in terms of needs," says Sister Kathy. "I've always wanted that experience. I wanted to live and work in a country completely different, and I wanted to meet our sisters there, work with them, and see what they do. They are magnificent."

Sister Maria Montalban Chavez is a school principal in Morropon, Peru. Two other sisters teach there, Sister Felicita Renteria Navarro, and religion instructor Sister Magna Lucia Castillo. Sister Kathy went to the school several times, and tutored a few students wrestling with math a couple of times a week.

Sister Kathy Cash (second from left) with some of the Benedictines at our monastery in Peru, from left, novice Delmira Ramos Garcia, Sister Mary Leah Baehl, Sister Arcelia Chumacero, Sister Maria Montalban Chavez, and Sister Felicita Renteria Navarro.



“One student even came to the house one evening and asked for help,” said Sister Mary Leah Baehl, another of the Peruvian sisters. Sister Kathy also sat in on other teachers’ classes, then shared her observations.

Sister Kathy’s biggest initial challenge was communicating in Spanish. “My vocabulary grew significantly, as I learned how to say things like ‘common denominator,’” she says, smiling. “I learned a lot of Spanish from the students. And they kept telling Sister Maria I was helping them in math.”

One of her “greatest triumphs” was Sister Maria telling the students after a few weeks that ‘Sister Kathy now speaks Spanish very well, you just need to speak to her slowly.’

Sister Kathy also taught six hours of class a week, in English, computers, and guitar, to a novice at the monastery, Delmira Ramos Garcia, age 22. Delmira particularly liked Sister Kathy’s style and the attention she gave.

Sister Mary Leah concurred, saying, “Sister Kathy has a way of making you feel good when you are not perfect. She added a new spirit to our community. We helped her learn Spanish, and she helped us learn English. Her visit was great for us and our people.”

Sister Kathy spent a lot of time with Sister Mary Leah, who runs a home for old people, a place for those who can no longer take care of themselves. “She takes care of funding the project, and taking care of anything they need,” said Sister Kathy. “And she tries her best to run a bakery. They bake bread and sell it to raise money. One day we went house to house, looking for people willing to sell bread.

“Sister Mary Leah also runs a small shop, selling candy, soft drinks, snacks and cleaning supplies. We spent the most time together making American-style oatmeal cookies, selling them for about a nickel apiece.”

One memorable trip was walking an hour-and-a-half up a mountain with a priest who would say mass at an outlying village, accessible only by foot. It was the first time in at least four months that the villagers had mass. A man from the town came out to meet the priest and Sister Kathy about halfway there, then ran back to alert the people and make final preparations.

Sister Kathy in the backyard of a convent in Santo Domingo, where three of our Benedictine sisters live in Peru.



“It was such a big deal,” said Sister Kathy. “The gratitude and love they showed to the priest, and to me because I was with him, was just amazing. They were so thankful he had mass with them, and listened to them. It was a big town party for several hours.

“That was probably the most emotional day for me, to be treated as an honored guest just for going there. But they have so few religious visitors, they were ecstatic to have a priest and a sister in town. It was very humbling, because I did nothing, to see the people with so much respect for the gift just of presence in their lives.”

Another sister, Romaine Kuntz, runs a health clinic in the Peruvian mountains. Many people are drawn to her, even though there’s a doctor in town, as she has much-needed medicine, plus a kind and gentle nature.

Sister Kathy noted that the people are very religious, as she spotted a picture of Jesus or Our Lady of Guadalupe in every house she visited. Some homes have exterior signs proclaiming they are Catholic.

“They haven’t had the religious education we’ve had in the U.S., so there are things to learn in terms of spirituality. But their faith is so strong in spite of that.” And the Benedictine sisters are working diligently to close the gap.

“I loved being part of their existence for a while. I love knowing now how other people have to live. And seeing how many things we take for granted in the U.S.” ■



Learning to trust God — through Spain, pain, rain

Trudging on along the 500-mile “Way of St. James,” through the heat, blisters, barking muscles, rain, and a seemingly never-ending trail, Sister Jeana Visel said the seeking of God kept her going for those 21 days.

It had been a 12-year dream of hers to walk the ancient path in northern Spain, the most popular Christian pilgrim route in the world. Also known as the Camino de Santiago, it’s patterned after a trek in the year 950 by a French monk to visit the remains of the Apostle St. James in Santiago de Compostela.

Over 100,000 pilgrims tackle the Camino annually, most wishing to find physical and spiritual renewal.

Sister Jeana, 33, a graduate student in Monastic Studies at St. John’s University – School of Theology in Collegeville, Minnesota, was in a group of seven from the college who undertook the pilgrimage.

She correctly anticipated the journey would be sacred. And even though that’s what her monastic life is all about as a Benedictine, her recent trip still proved to be a huge life lesson.

The first lesson – that she could live on a lot less -- came early, after a long day of walking in extreme heat with a too-heavy backpack that culminated in the humbling experience of puking in front of her fellow travelers. She took it as God grabbing her attention, telling her to get rid of excess baggage, that she couldn’t complete the journey without a lot of help and support. Kind of like life itself.

Above: Sister Jeana Visel in a lighter moment on the Way of St. James, amidst the walking silhouette figures at the peak of Alta de Perdon in Spain.

The next day, she ducked into a church at a most opportune time, just before communion. As she wrote in the journal she kept during the trip, one of many heartfelt entries, “I couldn’t help coming to tears on receiving. Dear God, I need you. I can’t make this pilgrimage alone. I felt so vulnerable.”

Soon thereafter, one of Sister Jeana’s worst days ended with her sinking into a pew in a small town’s church, “feeling sorry for myself, feeling awful, and I hurt, my feet were such a mess.” But she thought of her fellow sisters back in Ferdinand, Indiana, who “go through SO much more every day with much more dignity, dealing with cancer and all these things they carry, and they’re not whining or complaining.”

She wrote in her journal, “. . . (I) put my head down, and the tears came . . . I prayed that my pain might lessen theirs somehow, that in union with Christ’s pain it might be transformed. Then a kind voice asked if I were okay. I said yes, I just had a hard day and my feet hurt. He said that he had pain too . . . I guessed that someone else always had it worse.”

The short interaction with the man, a Fleming from Denmark, made Sister Jeana “very aware there’s something about being in solidarity with people who are hurting, that’s so fundamental to the human need to know that we’re not alone, and that we’re understood. It was a great lesson. His being there was a great gift, kind of like God showing up in angel form.”

Sister Jeana was also concerned about walking through driving rainstorms. She thought blisters would worsen because feet would be soaked, and the pain amplified. But she also remembered a lecture about the Camino she had attended at Saint Meinrad Archabbey, and the advice ‘don’t be afraid to walk in the rain.’ So one day when it looked like it would pour down rain, and others in her

*“God is not yet done
until things are set right.”*

group were thinking of taking a rest day, she decided to face her concern head-on, really wanting to get over the worry she had.

While it didn’t rain much that day, her resolve served her well later, appropriately on the long-awaited last day, walking into Santiago, to the much-anticipated final destination, the cathedral where St. James was buried.

The antidote? Singing. Which had been the answer to other challenging times on the road. Jamming with Stevie Wonder had, well, worked wonders.

“That last day, it was raining, and we were miserable,” says Sister Jeana. “We had to keep our spirits up, and I think singing was the biggest thing.”

She wrote in her journal, “I remember the priest at the pilgrim mass who urged us to make our Camino a joyful journey, and I don’t feel badly about singing our way through the pain. We managed to forget about the pain by tapping into the joy of shared beauty, and while the blisters and aching joints are very real, the joy too is real.”

The first day of walking for the group from St. John’s University – only 790 kilometers to go. Sister Jeana is second from left.



Sister Jeana in front of the Santiago Cathedral: "Wet, happy, and utterly awestruck that this actually happened."

In one way, the arrival in Santiago amidst such conditions made it even more emotional. "You walk under an arch, hear Scottish bagpipes, come around to the main square of the church, it's raining, and you just stand there and take it in, and we're in awe of being there, and saying we actually did this," she says, with wonder in her voice, and smiling broadly at the memory.

"And there's gratitude, utter gratitude. I say another of many spontaneous prayers of thanks: 'This is so beautiful, thank you, God.' You think of all the pilgrims and people who came through there. It's so cool to be part of something so much bigger than yourself."

Despite the blisters, soreness, and tears, Sister Jeana was actually "a little disappointed we didn't get to walk as much as I had hoped." But to walk the entire way takes about 35 days; her group only had 21 available. So they rode a bus some days, but still managed to walk probably close to 300 miles. Enough to physically experience the hardship, as she wanted to do, and certainly enough to savor the gifts received, and treasure the lessons learned.

"For me, the pilgrimage's first gift was of trust; it was an extended exercise in trust," says Sister Jeana. "Trust in those around you. Trust in God; God cares about you. That's what we do when we seek God. We need assurance it's OK, that we're going the right way, even if I don't know the whole map. It was wonderful to let go of the control of having to know everything, and just trusting that God is in charge and leading you, it's going to be OK."

"Even if you're in pain, it's not the end. I've always loved Julian of Norwich's quote, 'All shall be well.' I think if all is not well, then it's not yet the end. God is not yet done until things are set right. The Resurrection always trumps."

As a pilgrim, she knew the physical needs, and also the needs of the heart. Which is that everyone has pain, and that the hearts of all need to know they're not alone, that somebody understands you.



As she wrote in her journal, "Life has pain. We can accept it as part of our lot. We can embrace it as penance for our sins, as an offering for the sake of those we love. And it's OK to sing and enjoy the beauty of art, and to let go of awareness of pain for a while. Yet when it does come, when the blisters cannot be ignored, when the rain soaks through the poncho, when bones, muscles and tissues need rest, then we have an opportunity for grace. We have a chance to enter into the suffering of Our Lord. This pilgrimage forces solidarity, community, humility, patience, and gratitude. It has been an exercise in awareness, virtues, trust, and love. Every day has been a blessing."

Sister Jeana noted that so much of our life experience is based simply in our attitude. Pain can make people really bitter, or it can make them beautiful. It's how you choose that makes the difference. We do everything possible to avoid pain, but it's inevitable. It's how one deals with it that matters.

Maybe the ultimate lesson Sister Jeana learned is how she poignantly ended her journal: "I can walk the ends of the earth and meet wonderful people and see beautiful churches, but I have both right here. God is with me everywhere, on every part of my way, not just the Way of St. James. And so I need to live it. Lord Jesus, help me to live it." ■

‘Just get over it’ not the answer

Forgiving somebody who has really hurt you just isn't easy.

That's why Sister Jane Becker, a clinical psychologist at Saint Luke Center in Louisville, Kentucky, doesn't immediately advise clients in her therapy sessions to just "forgive and forget."

"Forgiving is not instant," said Sister Jane at her recent program, *Forgiveness: Forgiving What We Cannot Forget*, at Kordes Center in Ferdinand.

"We're human. We get into conflicts. Sometimes you can't just settle it. You have to work with the pain."

Judging from comments shared during the program, the 14 participants were all wrestling with how to get past some major hurts.

Many had lost jobs through no fault of their own. Some had issues with parents or children. One was a victim of sexual abuse.

Sister Jane talked frankly about what forgiveness is, what it isn't, offered some steps to take, and tools that could help.

"Forgiving is therapeutic," she said. "It's good for your soul and body."

"First, one needs to acknowledge the loss and anger. Part of being able to forgive is saying, 'yes, I was hurt.' Another step is giving up one's right to hurt back. Many of my clients don't want to give this up. So often, they just want an apology."

"One key is to think about the event differently, to try to see how it looked to the offender. That's not easy, but it's the basis for a lot of psychology work."

Sister Jane spoke of life's imperfection, and that things will inevitably go wrong, but that we can learn to suffer less.

One tactic is to move away from 'unenforceable rules' that we think should be followed. For example, if someone cuts you off on the interstate, you get mad because you

have an unenforceable rule that drivers should not cut you off. But according to Sister Jane, trying to enforce something over which we have no control only creates problems for ourselves.

So the trick is to change the way we think rather than trying to change the person who made us mad.

Among her other tips:

- "Give" is the most important part of "forgive"
- When mourning, reconnect with your noblest goals. You'll be energized.
- Instead of dwelling on the hurts, concentrate on the good in your life.
- Every night, write down five things you are grateful for. It's not a cure-all, but it will help.

Workshop participants were positive about what they heard.

Chris Woods wrote on his evaluation form, "I felt affirmed, learned a new paradigm for promoting forgiveness, and went away nourished and renewed."

"Forgiving is a huge obstacle in my life that I need to work through so that I can get on with my life unburdened. This retreat was a tremendous beginning!" said Jo Kostka.

"(Sister Jane) was caring and empathetic in her approach," wrote Gloria Rogers. ■

Sister Jane Becker emphasizes a point at her recent "Forgiveness" program at Kordes Center in Ferdinand.



Evansville mayor proclaims “Sister Karlene Sensmeier Day”

When the mayor of Indiana’s third-largest city, Evansville, designates a day of honor in your name, you must be doing something right.

Sister Karlene Sensmeier has been doing a lot of things right for the students at St. Benedict Cathedral School in Evansville for a long time.

The Mayor’s Proclamation stated, in part, “Sister Karlene has served the Catholic community of Evansville for over 30 years and has distinguished herself not only as an outstanding principal but also as a tireless educational and spiritual leader in our community.

“Sister Karlene spearheaded the drive for new construction which added a 3.4 million dollar expansion to the parish and school, providing safety for students and handicapped access for seniors, new rooms and meeting spaces, all during a difficult financial time.

“Her ministry to serve others and empower them to do their best is evident in the service projects she champions.

“Sister Karlene, who strives to see Christ in each person, has made a difference in the Evansville community . . .”

The proclamation was read at the St. Benedict Cathedral Mardi Gras celebration, attended by about 300. A highlight was the presentation of an oil portrait of Sister Karlene. The portrait was auctioned off — \$8,500 was accumulated in prior donations to make up the winning “bid.” The portrait is now displayed at the school.

A letter sent to parishioners that helped raise the donation stated, in part, “When Sr. Karlene (came back) in 1997, St. Benedict Cathedral School had a dwindling enrollment in the range of 230 students. As of January, 2012, our enrollment is approximately 460 students and we are one of the largest Catholic elementary schools in Indiana.

“More important is the moral and religious compass that Sister Karlene and teachers instill in each student.

“The proceeds from this auction will be placed in the



Sister Karlene Sensmeier (second from right) with the portrait of her unveiled at the St. Benedict Cathedral Mardi Gras celebration in Evansville. Others are Liz Borders (far left), Mardi Gras organizer; Courtney Kiefer, portrait artist; and Benedictine Father Gregory Chamberlin, pastor.

Sister Karlene Sensmeier Endowment (and) will provide financial aid to needy and deserving students.”

Donna Halverson, recently retired as assistant superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Evansville, said, “Sister Karlene’s office serves as a shelter in any of life’s storms. Her compassion and care know no bounds. Her door and heart are open to the needs of those she serves. She is very generous with the gift of time to others.

“She was the first principal to hire a learning resource teacher and led in obtaining administrative software, curriculum software, and lab resources for students. Academically, St. Benedict has remained in the top 5% of the state for years. She would credit her teachers who are known for academic rigor, but her teachers would say she sets that team expectation and monitors it closely. Probably her greatest asset is her strong and long record of leadership and collaboration. But most of all, her love for and pride in St. Benedict is contagious, and both parents and new students catch it!” ■

Enneagram a self-help tool



Sister Karlene Sensmeier explains the Enneagram at a Kordes Center program.

Self-improvement tools crop up everywhere, but one that sprouted over 4,000 years ago, the Enneagram, may still yield the most – if a person is honest about themselves and serious about making changes.

The Enneagram is a personality theory that identifies nine different types of people, then shows a path to improvement.

Fourteen people came looking for help at a recent workshop on the Enneagram led by Sister Karelene Sensmeier at Kordes Center on the monastery grounds.

“Sister Karlene did a fantastic job with an incredibly complex topic,” wrote Mary Coppinger of Marengo, Indiana, on her program evaluation sheet. “Her expertise is obvious, but her presentation is humble and engaging. It was a hopeful exploration, shining light on the path of the soul yearning for clarity.”

The first step is each person deciding which of the nine personality types they are, and their main patterns of thought and motivation. That’s not always an easy task. The key is to be completely honest with oneself, and to remember that no one type is inherently better or worse than another type. The overriding goal is to use the Enneagram tool to grow into the best one can be in their basic personality type.

“The beauty of the Enneagram is you can discover where your personal trap is, so then you can work to change it,” says Sister Karlene. “If you open up, you can focus on changing something through prayer. It’s important to take all of this in the context that we are creatures of God, and we are not perfect.

“The Enneagram’s genius is that it tells us the journey that will happen to us if we don’t intervene, if we don’t let God in.

“Each of us has a gift, but we don’t want to tarnish it by not using it right. Our greatest strength can become our greatest weakness if we’re not aware. The Enneagram can help us find the proper balance.”

Several attendees had prior experience with the Enneagram.

Dottie Cummins of Boonville, Indiana, wrote, “I needed to be refreshed on the Enneagram, and got it.”

Janie Smith of Ballwin, Missouri, felt the workshop was “a good start to a long journey of discovery.”

Sherri Roos of Ferdinand wrote, “The retreat exceeded my expectations. It has provided me with some great insight about me as a person.” ■

‘The sisters are a tremendous treasure’

“I am in awe of what Memorial Hospital and the Sisters of St. Benedict have put together,” Ron Mead told the crowd of about 60 at the Tri-State Conference on Integrative Medicine in Jasper, Indiana.

Mead, system vice president and chief mission integration officer for St. Vincent Health in Indianapolis, was talking about the three-year partnership between the Jasper hospital and the Ferdinand Benedictines. The sisters’ Spirituality Ministry team developed the spirituality component of the hospital’s integrative medicine program, which provides a variety of therapeutic tools for patients, and their families, that complement conventional treatment and focus on the mind, body, and soul.

The audience, mostly health care providers from across southern Indiana, also heard about the program’s benefits from several other speakers, including Sisters Maria Tasto, Michelle Mohr, and Anita Louise Lowe.

Sister Maria was the luncheon keynote speaker along with Mead, talking on the topic “Becoming Who We Are.”

Ray Snowden, president and CEO of Memorial Hospital, said in a breakout session about the sisters’ Compassionate Care & Healing programs, “The sisters are a tremendous treasure at our back door. We have this incredible resource right here.

“The sisters developed a wonderful program for us. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. I am very pleased with this. I think it will increase our efficiency and effectiveness, and I think we will be better caregivers.”

Charlotte Stephenson, a hospital nurse, thought the sisters’ programs were “very rewarding.” “They made me step back, and realize God is with me all the time,” she said. “I am very thankful for the sisters.”

The hospital and the sisters initially began discussions after a focus group of about 90 patients was asked what



Memorial Hospital President and CEO Ray Snowden talks about the Sisters of St. Benedict.

more could’ve been done during their cancer treatment. Many said that prayer wasn’t discussed, and felt that it should be.

Through the ensuing collaboration with the sisters, spiritual formation is now a key part of the journey at Memorial Hospital.

Sisters Michelle and Anita Louise also explained and gave a demonstration of Compassionate Healing, a service that is offered by volunteers to cancer patients at the hospital.

Memorial Hospital’s Kelly Clauss said, “Compassionate Healing has been a big gift to us at the Cancer Center. Patients look forward to it.” ■

‘God’s love is truly unconditional’

The heartfelt comments are so good to hear, especially from hospital employees whose careers are all about serving and helping others.

Employees from Memorial Hospital and Health Care Center in Jasper, Indiana, continue to attend spirituality programs at the monastery’s Kordes Center.

Recently, Sister Maria Tasto presented three of the six conferences of *A Transformed Life*, in which she guides participants along the path of becoming who God created them to be.

Some of the hospital employees said they came for a spiritual uplifting, so they could become better nurses for their patients. Others came to experience again the monastery’s calmness and the escape it provides from daily stress.

The feedback they shared on evaluation sheets showed the program hit the mark.



Sister Maria Tasto presents *A Transformed Life* to Memorial Hospital employees.

Many comments centered on Sister Maria’s calming presence, her authenticity, and her easy-to-understand delivery. One stated, “I always feel God’s presence in your presence.”

Much of the feedback focused on how individuals were helped by the messages in *A Transformed Life*.

Ashley Erny wrote, “The programs have helped me spiritually walk down the path and grow during some difficult times. I have come out on the other side with a deeper spiritual understanding.”

Charlotte Stephenson said, “Once again, I feel refreshed and ready to use God’s gifts to better the lives of others, and to show his love through my actions.”

Rhonda Robinson summed it up by writing, “It helped to reinforce to me that God’s love is truly unconditional, and through his mercy and grace we can be to others what they need.” ■



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- Visit Monastery Immaculate Conception – for Mass, a tour, community prayer, or a peaceful stroll on our grounds.
- Explore and renew your faith at a program hosted by our Spirituality Ministry.
- Volunteer your time and talents.
- Consider becoming an Oblate.
- Ask for our prayers. It's what we do, at least three times a day.
- Visit our gift shop, For Heaven's Sake, either in person or online. Our monastery-baked cookies are always available there.
- Or support our ministries with a gift.

However you wish to take part, we welcome you to our community with joy. Because hospitality is another thing that we do.