

# It's What We Do

A collection of stories about the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand, Indiana | 2013



**Volunteers  
restore homes,  
smiles**

Page 4



**Connecting  
moms with  
Gospel moms**

Page 12





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

You'll read how one sister takes on the tough job of pediatric hospice care. How another sister coordinated a volunteer group to travel all the way to New York to help put shattered homes and lives back together. And how five sisters played a special role in Rome for seminarians and priests for 24 years.

You'll see how other sisters deliver thought-provoking, advice-laden presentations as only Benedictines can. And how one keeps a Peru nursing home operating despite long odds.

You'll hear what others feel about the myriad ways sisters help people. It's eye-opening, rejuvenating, and reaffirming.

So enjoy your time with this edition. To keep up regularly with what the sisters are doing, please visit our website, [www.thedome.org](http://www.thedome.org).



On the cover: Sister Cathy Ann Robinson feeds hospice patient Aggie Justice in her Indianapolis, Indiana, home.

## Contents

### Page 1

Guiding people through difficulties

### Page 4

Restoring homes, hope, smiles

### Page 7

Ministering a woman's perspective in Rome

### Page 10

Healing through canon law

### Page 12

Connecting moms with Gospel moms

### Page 14

Does God speak to the pope more than to you?

### Page 16

Benedictine Conversation lights up monasteries

### Page 17

Looking for another form of spirituality?

### Page 18

Sister, 82, runs old folks' home

### Page 20

Talking consensus to priests

### Page 21

Finding courage to eat the Gospel

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# Guiding people through ‘the most difficult part of our lives’

Frightened eyes continually look to Sister Cathy Ann Robinson for answers to the most agonizing questions a parent could have.

Is my child really going to die? Can we do anything at all to help him? What can we tell her about her condition? Will he be in a lot of pain?

Questions without the easiest of answers. Or answers parents really don't want to hear. But Sister Cathy Ann has the courage and patience to field the queries that most others flee from.

It takes a special person with a special gift to embrace such a job. You know there will be tears, even anger, but you know what you have to say. Sister Cathy Ann is as reassuring as possible, yet holds firm as a hospice case manager for St. Vincent's Hospice – Home Care in Indianapolis.

But she's much more than a hospice employee. She's also a registered nurse, specializes in pediatric care as well as adults, and brings the trademark compassion of a Benedictine sister. It's a unique combination that others readily recognize and dearly appreciate. It's a tough calling. To her credit, she continues to answer it.

Theresa Weisenbach well remembers the Sister Cathy Ann treatment received by her daughter, Megan, 12, who died last year.

"I'm a nurse, so I know pediatric care is very intense," said Theresa.

"Sister Cathy Ann was very comforting. You could trust her. And she brought the spiritual side, the calming presence as a sister. She's not just a hospice nurse.

"She was a big part of helping us through the most difficult part of our lives. On days when we thought Megan wouldn't make it, Sister Cathy Ann always wanted us to call, because she wanted to do what was best for Megan. She would come late in the evening, or on weekends. I won't ever forget what she did on Megan's last day. She came over after she got off work and stayed with us the entire time, for five hours, until Megan passed at 11:15 p.m. That was very special for us."

That's when you know a sister's ministry is way more than a job. It's a true calling.

Indeed, Sister Cathy Ann identifies strongly with Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a Benedictine saint known for her healing powers, and also for taking in the dying and caring for them.

"God spoke to her to do the very difficult things in life," says Sister

**Above: Sister Cathy Ann Robinson (left) shares a laugh with hospice patient Aggie Justice in her Indianapolis home last May. Aggie passed away a few days later.**

*“She brings a sense of peace, friendship and caring. I couldn’t imagine doing this work without her.”*

Cathy Ann. “When she didn’t, she fell ill, but when she listened to God and found the courage to do what she was called to do, she was healed.

“I think this is what God has called me to do at this time. My passion is for the pediatric patients.” She is one of the rare nurses that will do pediatrics, but admittedly does so because she knows of the heightened difficulty of caring for a dying child.

“Kids aren’t supposed to die, but they do,” she says, voice cracking, knowing the special niche our babies have in our hearts. “And we have to take care of the family, too.”

She’s been yelled at by agitated parents, but she is undeterred, knowing they are losing a child and are likely to strike out at somebody. “I just sit and listen, trying to make things as right as I can for them. They’ll apologize later. It’s just a tough, very difficult time, and it hurts. I have to rely on God to get me through. I ask God to help me, to give me the wisdom to persevere.”

She recalled going to the funeral of the child of her most challenging family. The parents told her they knew they were rough on her, but added ‘we couldn’t have done it without you.’

Sister Cathy Ann keeps a thick handful of Thank You notes she’s received in a file drawer. Her workspace walls are filled with photos of children she’s worked with, plus more notes from parents. One heart-shaped note that particularly touches her states, “Sister Cathy, I thought of you today and then I felt a warm rush of love come over me. Truly, all my love, Nicole, Leah’s mom.”

In 2012 she won St. Vincent Hospice’s GEM (Going the Extra Mile) Award for her care of a pediatric patient. In her nomination form, Anne Alderfer, a hospice worker, wrote, “Sister Cathy provided above and beyond hospice service to our 17-year-old (pediatric) patient and his family . . . (she) made several calls to their home on call over the weekend . . . on Thursday she was making a routine visit and was going to leave but recognized (the family) was

having difficulty coping with the patient’s declining condition, his vitals dropped and she remained with the family for 4 hours through the patient’s death. She provided a steady, calm, professional hospice presence to (the) family who were obviously distraught about losing their beloved 17-year-old a few days before Christmas. She did all this quietly without asking for anything. She is our unsung hero of our humblest voices, our dying children. I am asking everyone to lift her up and blow gently on her angel wings so she can continue to flourish in her hospice ministry.”

Sister Cathy Ann spends much of her time in patients’ homes, but also goes to hospitals, nursing homes, and visits in-patients at the hospice center. She checks blood pressure, body temperature, listens for heart rate and respiratory rate, reviews and documents on patient charts, and assesses pain level, anxiety, shortness of breath and nausea to coordinate care. She does all tenderly, with the experienced hand of a pro, with patients ranging from infants to over 100 years old. She also fields medical questions, doling out answers to address family members’ concerns.

And as a religious sister, prayers and spirituality discussions often materialize. One lady lamented to her, “I talked to God last night, but there was no answer.” Sister Cathy Ann replied, “It comes in God’s time, not ours.”

People often ask her how she can handle such a job, coping with the continuing inevitable emotions of working with up to 13 patients a week. Some hardened firemen, used to dealing with people in very critical situations, said they could not do hospice work.

**Sister Cathy Ann listens to questions from patient Aggie Justice. Aggie’s son, Christopher, said, “Sister Cathy Ann has been great the past two days. She’s patient, gentle, and has the personality characteristics for this. She makes it very easy.”**



Sister Cathy Ann checks the blood pressure of hospice patient Helen Horky in the Indianapolis home of her daughter, Susan Eldon. Susan said, "Hospice employees are wonderful. They're worth their weight in gold. Their coming into the home is a relief. It's a really big deal to me."

"It's because of God's grace," she says. "You focus on what you're doing to help a family get through a very difficult time, and knowing that a child dies peacefully. I always say they're just growing their wings so they can fly into heaven, and be another one of God's little angels. You just try to give them some quality of life, and to help them die with dignity."

"Yes, I shed tears. And it's very stressful. We have so many losses. But it's also a real ministry for me. One nurse we had didn't last long, because she just wanted a job. You can't do this work just to have a job."

Co-workers quickly acknowledge the benefits Sister Cathy Ann brings to St. Vincent Hospice.

"She's got a great clinical judgment and knowledge but also a calming presence with patients," said Doctor Emily Giesel. "She brings a sense of peace, friendship and caring. I couldn't imagine doing this work without her."

Julie Hatfield of the inpatient unit, who is learning how to handle the pediatrics component from Sister Cathy Ann, said, "She is one of the most awesome nurses. I could not do it without her. She's such a presence in the home, assessing the child, letting the parents know what to expect. That's huge. She knows the time to share the gentle truth and the time to be quiet."

The most emotional testimonial was shared by Linda Farley, home hospice development manager, RN.

"Sister has such a mission heart, a servant heart. There's an art to being present to people at end of life. She does that so well. Her specialty is pediatrics. It's a different walk. Not all nurses can do it. She follows the patients and families completely through the whole journey."

"It's easier to accept death when someone's getting older. But for a little one who hasn't experienced the birthdays, the graduations, love . . ." Her voice trails off. The tears come quickly, for her, for Sister Cathy, for me.



"She is very unique because she is a vessel, she knows someone has to do it, and that God has given her the grace. She's able to put aside her own feelings of sadness, to be really present so she's an open vessel. She's able to minister to people in a deeper sense than those of us that have not had the space yet to develop that God-dwelling within. She's open to that free-flowing, spirit-healing presence, God's action. Sister has honed her gift to have it be more pure."

"What she's doing so beautifully is modeling the way to do this, training other nurses. The beauty is that they respect her, appreciate her knowledge within her passion, and how she draws that passion from her inner well. Sister creates a space for everyone to feel included and cared for. That's one of the reasons I love Benedictines, that real gift of hospitality. That's part of ministering to all different kinds of people, whether you're rich or poor or challenging."

For her part, Sister Cathy Ann doesn't see the things she does as extraordinary, simply saying, "I just do what I do."

"I know this is going to sound morbid, but taking care of those children who are dying gives me life," she says profoundly, tears welling once more. "I can't save them. That's why many nurses have a hard time. They're used to healing patients, not losing them. It's a different mindset. But they have a right to die with peace. If they're in pain, they can't do the inner work they need to do to let go, and let God take them."

That's when Sister Cathy Ann becomes the open vessel. And it IS extraordinary. ■





## Sister T's volunteers restore homes, hope, smiles

People in Long Island, New York, couldn't believe the destruction delivered by Superstorm Sandy's fury last October. Lives and homes changed in an instant.

And after seven agonizing months of broken promises to help repair their houses, five New York families couldn't believe that a sister would organize a busload of volunteer youth and adults to come all the way from southern Indiana to help put their shattered houses and lives back together.

But they didn't know the boundless energy and passion to serve others of Sister Teresa Gunter (better known as Sister T), life teen coordinator for St. Anthony of Padua Church in Evansville. And they didn't know how persuasive she is in enlisting others to join the cause.

So after four days of work last summer by a crew of 54, including 34 youth and 20 adults, the lives and homes of those five families changed again, but this time for the good.

**Above: Sister Teresa Gunter (third from left) waits to celebrate at a closing dinner with the New York families her volunteer group helped. With Sister T are (from left) Emily Miles, Anna Tucker, and Haley LaMar.**

One beneficiary, Laurise Frey, who has the added challenge of being handicapped, said of Sister T, "I will never forget that woman. I tell stories about her all the time. I call her the crazy nun they should make a movie about, because she gets on a bus and drives 20 hours from Indiana with all these youth. It was at a time that was so hard for me, when I didn't remember that I knew how to laugh, but they were so much fun, they made me laugh. It was so joyful."

Laurise said it's still heartwrenching to look around her Long Island neighborhood. Four nearby houses have been torn down. Most of her neighbors still haven't returned home.

"But Sister T doesn't let you get sad or feel sorry for yourself," said Laurise. "She's so full of energy, so bouncy, and has such an 'up' attitude. She's like the Energizer battery."

Sister T's enthusiastic and lighthearted approach spreads easily to the teenagers and adults she works with. But she shares life lessons along the way, too.

As a youth minister, she takes under her wing many teenagers from less-than-ideal family and home situations. Better yet, besides building up their confidence, she also inspires them to serve others.

"I try to make everything fun," says Sister T, 46. "Life is too serious, and many of these kids are going through a tough enough time as it is. The ironic thing about the New York trip is that some of these teenagers don't have much of a home either. One lives with 14 others in his grandma's house. They know what it's like. But I tell them there are still people worse off than them. They saw that in New York. Some of them thanked me.

"Some even went to Miss Frey and told her it was going to be OK, because they know they're going to be OK with their own situation." Sister T is particularly thrilled when her youth deliver such messages of reassurance to others in tough circumstances. Of course, she sets a pretty clear example.

When members of her teen group suggested last spring they go to New York to help the hurricane victims, Sister T didn't flinch. She simply set about rounding up adult home repair experts to go along, lined up a bus, called to see who they could help and where they could stay, and organized fundraisers to finance the \$14,000 trip.

Her approach to tackling such a daunting task?

"I pretty much live by the Phillipians 4:13 verse 'I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me,'" she says. "When kids say 'I can't do that,' I just reply, 'I know you can,' simply because I believe in them."

Just like so many others believe in Sister T.

Jonna O'Bryan, a youth minister from Good Shepherd Parish who also went on the New York trip with some of her teens, has known Sister T for 15 years.

"Sister T helps kids see Christ in everybody they meet, so they're able to be that compassionate

**Sister Teresa Gunter (front left) and her volunteers act silly by waving to passing cars as they wait for a group picture in New York. They worked hard on storm-ravaged homes, but played hard, too.**

heart along with her," says Jonna. "The Lord showed his face everywhere while we were there. The kids saw that, and they felt it as well."

One of the Evansville youth, Emily Earhart, a 2013 Memorial High School graduate, says, "You don't think you can do a lot of this stuff until Sister T goes, 'You can totally do this.' She pushes us so we learn a lot about ourselves and what we can do. She's persuasive, but she does it in a fun manner. She's so much fun.

"In New York, she helped us a lot, and she didn't have much sleep, because she had to keep an eye on us," said Emily, laughing.

But Sister T embraces the potential of youth, and delights in helping turn it into reality.

"A lot of people couldn't believe I was going all that way with 34 kids, being loud, crazy, and goofing off," says Sister T, "but people who say that don't know youth, they don't know the capability of getting 34 youth behind a common goal and how they can accomplish anything. They don't know the other side, that these kids WANT to be servants, they want to help people."

The mess they confronted in New York was stunning. One elderly lady's yard was still engulfed with debris, electrical wiring, ruined appliances and furniture. Other homes needed walls removed, new ones erected, carpet replaced, and roof holes covered. The Indiana contingent quickly came to the rescue, providing repairs that moved





disbelieving homeowners to tears. The volunteers ripped up rotted linoleum, laid down tile, installed carpet and drywall, painted, put up ceilings, fences and lattice work. The bus driver even pitched in with the know-how to replace busted windows.

Angela Schweers was among the absolutely amazed homeowners.

"They were a fantastic group of kids," she said. "Just meeting them, listening to them, it really restores your faith in youth. And Sister Teresa was fantastic. She has this leadership ability where people just flock to her. She makes you feel comfortable, and she's there for your concerns. That group did a tremendous amount for the people out here. It was a really great experience for my family."

Stephanye Smith, an Evansville adult volunteer, said it was noticeable how much the devastation the New Yorkers endured weighed heavy on Sister T's heart.

"You can tell when somebody feels this is where we need to be, helping these people," she said. "And Sister T does a good job of making people realize good things come to those who are faithful and humble. You can tell how excited she is that these kids are giving of themselves. But she has helped create what they've become. Many would not be where they're at in their faith walk without her."

Sister T prepped the teenagers for the trip by showing them the 1987 movie *The Princess Bride*. In the film, whenever a young woman gives her farmboy an order, he quickly replies "as you wish" and happily complies. That's how Sister T wanted them to answer whenever someone asked them to do something in New York. They did, and they continue to jovially use the phrase within their group.

"It was pretty neat that she related to a movie what she wanted us to be for our trip, to give of yourself to others," says Stephanye. "Think of yourself last, put others before your needs, that's why we were there."

Another of Sister T's fitting touches was presenting a foot-long cross signed by all the volunteers to each of the New York families. Signifying that it was only through God that the mission trip happened, the crosses found honored places in the refurbished homes and brought more tears of happiness.

Father Kevin Smith, a New York priest and long-time acquaintance of Sister T, provided lodging for the group. "She's feisty," he laughed,

"and generous and compassionate, and really knows how to get the best out of young people. The amount of people she brought was amazing. They were on the busses so long, and worked so hard, and they did all that for the goodness of God. It was great.

"Sister T is extraordinary. You don't meet too many religious consecrated women like her. She's just so bubbly and positive, keeps everybody's energy and morale going. She is a real asset to the Church."

The most rewarding part of the trip for Sister T was seeing hope restored to the New York families, seeing smiles return to their faces, and knowing that she helped "in some little way." She was also moved by how the volunteers took the phrase "as you wish" to heart. "They worked together to do things they never thought they would do, and just showed love to each other. At the beginning, people were strangers, and then they were family. Amazing."

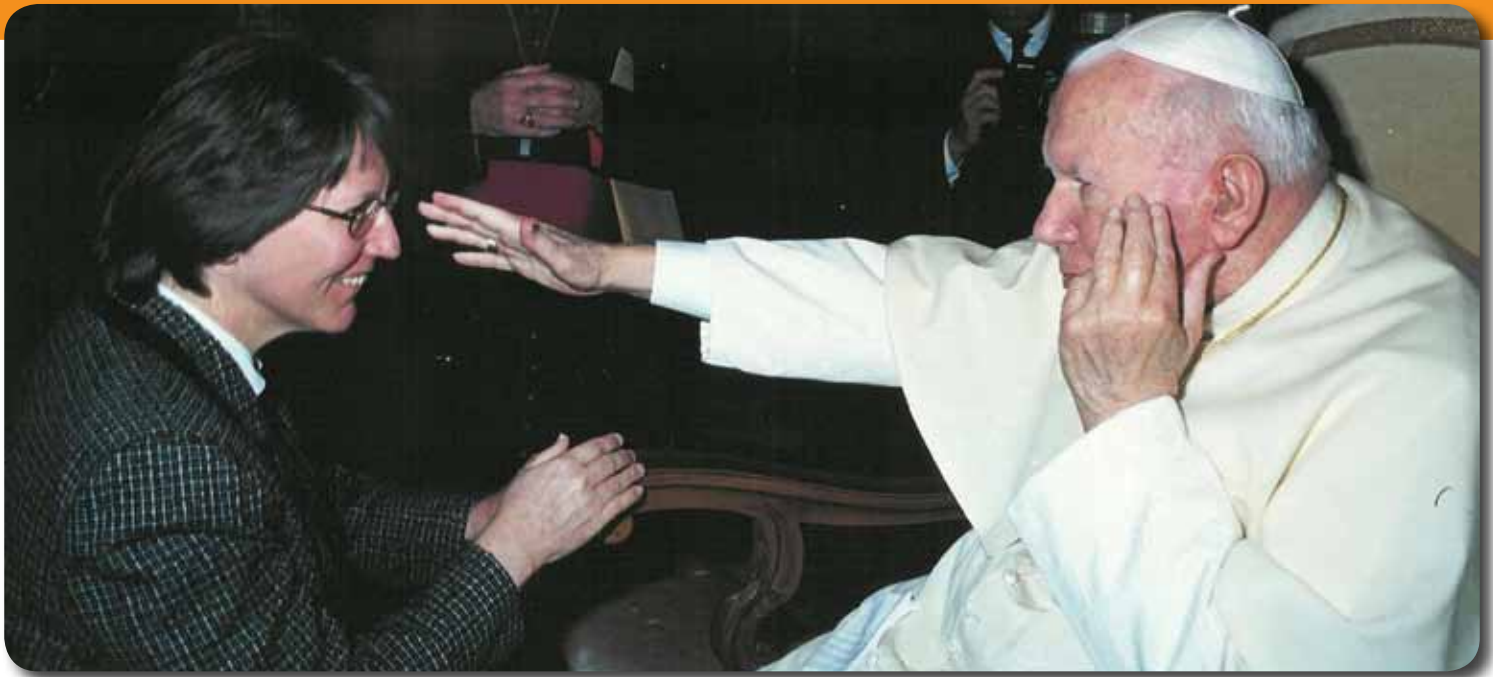
They helped people in need, and lives changed. Both for those being helped and those helping.

As they wished. And as Sister T wished. ■



**Sister Teresa Gunter leads a prayer service on the 20-hour bus ride to New York.**





## Ministering a woman's perspective to Rome seminarians and priests

The Ferdinand Benedictines recently wrapped up a remarkable 24-year run of having a sister on the professional staff at the Pontifical North American College (PNAC) in Rome, Italy.

In 1989, the college's rector, Msgr. Larry Purcell, had a revolutionary thought for the time – he had witnessed the “invaluable role of women leadership in the Church,” had “strong convictions about the contribution that consecrated women religious have in priestly formation,” and wanted a sister on the staff.

He knew the value of the feminine perspective. “Women see things that men are blind to,” said Msgr. Purcell. “Women have an intuition that is their great gift.” But priests at the Rome institution have certainly seen the contributions of five different Ferdinand Benedictines that served at the PNAC. It's an impressive achievement.

As a facility for the spiritual formation of American seminarians, located near the Vatican and St. Peter's Basilica, the PNAC is a top-flight institution for the best and brightest. Not just anybody is admitted there, and not just anybody is picked to be on the staff.

Sister Jane Becker was the first of the Ferdinand Benedictines to minister at PNAC, starting a five-year stint in 1989 as staff psychologist. She was followed by Sister Rebecca Abel as librarian for the past 17 years, Sister Mary Carol Kinghorn as assistant librarian for five years, Sister Norma Fultz as archivist for five years, and Sister Susan Mary Hooks as assistant vice-rector of administration/comptroller for the past 12 years. Sister Rebecca, 71, and Sister Susan, 59, retired from their Rome positions last summer and returned to Ferdinand.

Because of its prominence, the PNAC doesn't invite applicants for open positions. It simply asks the quality people they're already familiar with. That's how Msgr. Purcell started with Sister Jane, and the PNAC felt comfortable enough to continue hiring other Ferdinand sisters through the years.

“Sister Jane was the first woman religious to work one-on-one with seminarians (at PNAC) and in evaluating their progress,” said Msgr. Purcell, now at the Diocese of San Diego. “She came with exceptional professional training and experience, and improved the priestly formation program. Seminarians benefited from their counseling with sister. We were exceptionally fortunate in having our first experience of working with a woman religious on a peer level be so positive. She added to the human dimension as well as the spiritual viewpoint.”

Although Sister Susan joined the PNAC staff seven years after Sister Jane returned to the U.S., when former students learned Sister Susan was a Ferdinand Benedictine, their first words to her were, “How is Sister Jane?” Ironically, that same question is also often posed to Msgr. Stephen Orr, vice rector in the early '90s, when he sees priests now who were PNAC students.

**Above: Pope John Paul II extends his hand to bless Sister Susan Mary Hooks in 2003. His Holiness greeted her with, “Oh, the sisters are here, too!”**



**Sister Jane Becker was the first Ferdinand Benedictine to minister in Rome.**

Msgr. Orr wrote, "The staff wanted to help seminarians see the professional competence of women who have so much to offer to the Church. Sister Jane and the others from Ferdinand were good, healthy role models. As an all-male staff until her arrival, we benefited from the woman's perspective in our staff meetings, particularly of a woman religious. She helped to broaden our vision and how we ministered to the seminarians."

Besides her ministry as a therapist, Sister Jane also taught pastoral formation classes on communications and conflict management. "A lot of the seminarians were so glad there was a woman to talk to," said Sister Jane. "They were more comfortable telling a woman about some issues. And they were impressed with our sisters' commitment to the Church and Christ. That was a good example for them."

Sister Jane was instrumental in getting Sister Rebecca to the PNAC, first on a six-month sabbatical in 1993 to computerize their archives, then as the librarian in 1996. It was a perfect match. Their library needed to be weeded out, and computerized. "I'm a very good weeder, and I know my books," said Sister Rebecca, smiling. And she's a computer whiz, and quite adept at building a scholarly collection of books. After all, she's been in the field for over 40 years.

Sister Rebecca supervised two libraries at PNAC. The main one contained 84,000 books, and a graduate house library had 28,000. Collection development was critical. She estimates putting in half the titles. She often had to find out-of-print books, or locate a rare manuscript in a time crunch. But with all her connections in Europe, she knew where to dig. A student once asked for an "off-the-wall German article from nowhere." She put out the request to a list of European librarians. Within 19 minutes she received a pdf of the article from the University of Oslo.

Sister Rebecca fielded daily book and reference requests from the full house of 256 seminarians and the 70 priests at the graduate building. She enjoyed the work so much that in her spare time, normally on Saturdays, she would help other libraries that couldn't afford a librarian. One of her biggest joys was working with the Jubilee Center, a house of religious studies for women from all over the world.

Her work was well noticed. One cardinal gave her a dinner and a gift as a parting thank you. Many others took her out for farewell meals.

**Sister Susan Mary in her office in Rome.**

Even the domestic workers – the cleaners, cooks, and plumbers – gave her a surprise reception in a conference room adorned with a huge "Super Sister Rebecca" sign.

"Students told me they were so glad to have a woman around," she said. "As a woman, you have motherly instincts, and they come out. They appreciated that, because they missed women. And they needed to see that women, too, can have a call, because they're experiencing a call themselves. To see religious women live many years in that call inspires and comforts them. We had discussions about that, and I think I influenced many of them. That was very rewarding."

Sister Rebecca expects to continue as a library consultant, setting up small religious libraries with an electronic catalog. She's already assisted one in England, and is eyeing another in Scotland.

Rev. Msgr. James Checchio, current rector for administration at PNAC, said, "Sister Rebecca was the longest serving member of our faculty. Her ever-friendly welcome, her competent skills in administering the library, her commitment to prayer and our Lady, were all very much appreciated and inspiring. She certainly left her mark."

Another who left a lasting mark was Sister Susan, as comptroller and assistant vice-rector for administration. She was invited by Msgr. Kevin McCoy, rector, to centralize all business office operations from the Rome campus. She was responsible for PNAC's daily financial operations and involved with personnel, plant management, and supervised a bookkeeper, accounting clerk, and a purchasing manager. When she arrived in 2001, she termed their automated accounting system as "very generic." A complete overhaul of the Business Office included policies, procedures, and technology upgrades.

At a farewell banquet last summer, Msgr. Checchio said Sister Susan had taken the business office from operating out of a cigar box theory to today's more well-defined operating system.

Msgr. Checchio stated in a recent email, "Sister's contributions added a lot of stability, particularly our fiscal operations. We had clean audits all the years she was responsible, which is not an easy task, compli-







**Sister Rebecca Abel in the main library of the Pontifical North American College in Rome.**

cated by being in a foreign country. We are grateful for her patient and steady hand in guiding these financial records. This was important for the good operation of the college.”

Msgr. Michael Farmer, PNAC’s vice rector, said, “Sister Susan offered an excellent example of Benedictine spirituality and of faithful stewardship of her time and talents, as well as insuring the college’s fiscal integrity. The audits have always received commendations, due in large part to her diligence, professionalism, and Christian stewardship. The business office is better than when she arrived.” Msgr. Farmer has also mentioned to others the amazing job Sister Susan did in overhauling the college’s bookkeeping system.

For Sister Susan, one of the most enjoyable and rewarding times of her Rome ministry was teaching basic parish office business practices to seminarians as part of their pastoral formation prior to ordination to priesthood.

“Some students were concerned with not having any business formation,” she says. “They would come to me sharing some of their fears of not knowing how to run a parish

office. One formation evening of the fourth year was dedicated to ‘Basic Parish Office Business Practices,’ which I and another priest presented. It was energizing to share my business manager experience, and emphasize the need of working together. It helped them understand the importance of stewardship, one of the Benedictine charisms I treasure. Many expressed their gratitude.”

That Sister Susan’s lessons were absorbed was evident in comments made about her when she was presented with a Silver Jubilee gift from students in 2010: “. . . she has been a clear example of how the Lord makes use of all our gifts and talents . . . the job she does for us is indispensable, especially in these days of economic turmoil . . . we expect that you see many more years of running the way of God’s commandments with unspeakable sweetness of love.”

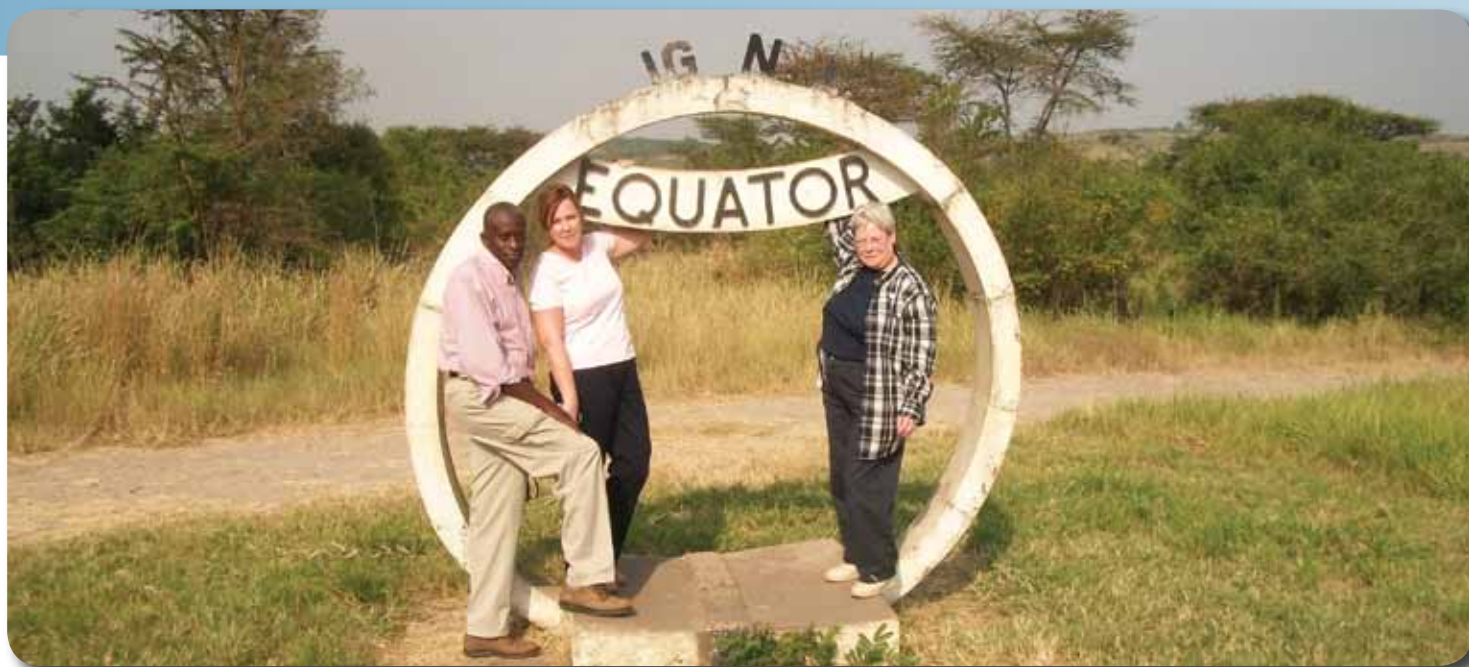
One evening after prayer, a newly ordained priest noticed that Sister Susan paused regularly before leaving chapel. Sister Susan explained that it was a time of reflection and shifting from the busyness of the day. This made an impression on him to slow down and be attentive to the moments. She said, “Sometimes others would thank me for the kind, peaceful feminine presence. They noticed the importance of prayer in my life.”

Msgr. Checchio noticed, too, citing work and prayer as examples she gave the students. “The long tradition of religious life so wonderfully exhibited by Benedictines is a good example for the seminarians,” he wrote. “We will be grateful to the Benedictine Sisters of Ferdinand for many years to come! They have been very generous to the college. We are grateful for the vitality they added and will remember them with gratitude in prayer.” ■



**Sister Susan Mary Hooks reading to about 750,000 at the Easter Vigil in St. Peter’s Square, Rome, in 2002. Pope John Paul II is at the left. “I was shocked, nervous, and honored all at the same time,” says Sister Susan. The Vatican had called, looking for an English-speaking religious.**





## Sister Celeste heals through canon law, from Owensboro to Africa

Sister Celeste Boda's title as judicial assistant for the Tribunal in the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky, conjures up an image of solemn lawyer-like duties. But she prefers to describe what she does, and rightly so, as "a real healing ministry."

Because she often sees people, anguished and guilt-ridden over a failed marriage, rebound from that turmoil and enter new, healthy marriages. It's a true joy for her to witness, and a Godsend to the partners turning their lives around.

The office she works in, under the direction of the Very Rev. J. Michael Clark, judicial vicar, is the legal arm of the Church in the Owensboro diocese. The tribunal renders decisions in matters of canon law (laws governing the faith and practice of the Catholic Church). While most of Sister Celeste's work deals with declarations of invalidity of marriages, she can become involved with any church legal issues, ranging from other sacramental matters to property disputes.

And her ministry recently took her all the way to the African country of Uganda.

She went on the trip with Father Mike and Louanne Payne, director of the tribunal, to help teach priests and sisters in Uganda's Fort Portal Diocese about declarations of invalidity of marriages and how to aid their parishioners as advocates. Their two-day seminar was a thank you gesture for Fort Portal's Father Titus Ahabyona, a native Ugandan who studied canon law in Canada and worked for six years in the Owensboro tribunal office.

Sister Celeste spoke to the African group of nearly 70 about psychic incapacity, a canon law dealing with a possible defect in judgment that could prevent one from proper reasoning in entering a marriage.

"A number of priests told me afterward that I did a very fine job," said Sister Celeste, who has a civil law degree. "They were receptive. Several of the sisters also came up to me with questions.

"The priests and sisters were very open to our presentation. It was a good foundation for the priests. Priests are given some training in canon law in their seminary, maybe a semester or two. But when they get out into the field, it's a completely different thing to put marriage canons into practice in an advocate role."

Father Titus wrote in an email, "Sister Celeste presented on matrimonial consent. She talked well about the lack of sufficient use of reason, grave lack of discretionary judgment, and those who are able to assume the essential rights and duties of marriage. She presented very well. Most of the information was new to the people."

What was new to Sister Celeste was experiencing the African culture.

"You can't go there and not be changed," she said. "Most of the people don't have much. No running water, no electricity, a house of mud, a floor of dirt. But it was so rewarding to see the beauty of the people. They are so friendly, and SO happy to see you.

**Above: Father Titus Ahabyona, Louanne Payne, and Sister Celeste Boda at an Equator sign in Africa.**

"I came away humbled by my own dependence on what we have in our western culture. I like flushing toilets and running water I can count on, electricity I can count on. But for the African people without that, life goes on, they think nothing of it, it's just the way it is. I marvel at the joy they have in life, and their ability to know the land better than we do. And how much they appreciate what God has given them. I think sometimes we forget all that.

"I was out of my element there sometimes, plain and simple. But that's good. You need that once in a while."

Sister Celeste's voice softened as she recalled seeing a cute baby that was very ill with malaria, most likely to die. And she recalled the tears she shed, knowing that baby could be cured in the U.S.

"We take so much for granted in the U.S., our comforts and conveniences. But when you look at those little African children, and see that simple joy, that's what it's all about ultimately, anyway. It's not about all the nice things we have."

Father Mike knew it was nice to have Sister Celeste as part of the Owensboro speakers in Uganda.

"Being a religious sister assisted her in an environment that is very patriarchal," he said. "A religious sister has a certain level of validation. Sister Celeste, being a civil lawyer, gave her another level of validation in their eyes. She was articulate, her examples were ones people could relate to. She got very positive feedback. There was good interaction. What she said was not only well received, but called them to be very engaged in the conversation."

The speakers focused on teaching the African religious and lay leaders in the Church how to be advocates for the rights of the people and the rights of the Church. It was all about steering people through troubled times, just like the tribunal does in the Owensboro Diocese.

Sister Celeste becomes involved in cases after a divorce is final, when that person later requests an investigation into the validity of their marriage. Her review and recommendations help Father Mike, as the judge, decide whether a marriage is valid or invalid.

The questioning of petitioners is rigorous, delving into how they approached their previous marriage and coming to grips with what went wrong. The self-introspection can reveal some painful truths to petitioners about themselves, and it's a great first step to healing.

The whole process focuses on caring for the dignity of marriage and working for the good of the people involved.

"Marriage tribunal work is a healing ministry, because going through it with a petitioner can be heart-wrenching, but we've had many say it was an excellent experience, to put a closure on a past marriage, to dig deep and really look at yourself, to own some of the pain, and get the chance to work through it again," says Sister Celeste.

"They can then move forward into another marriage, if they choose,

and it can be a good marriage in the Church. They can learn by looking back. One thing to address in marriage preparation is communication – the ability to work through conflict, to forgive, and reconciliation."

Sister Celeste laughs. "I'm not personally very good at conflict resolution myself. But this process makes me realize I need to work on this, because it's critical in any relationship. I've had my eyes opened."

After her review of a case, she can recommend to the judge that a person must address certain issues before entering a new marriage. The goal is to facilitate personal growth so the next marriage can be healthy and successful.

"We do this because marriage is beautiful when lived out with its original intent," she says. "The idea is that husband and wife should bring one another to the kingdom of heaven."

Father Mike knows that Sister Celeste is a key part of the tribunal moving people forward in their faith.

"She's a critical piece in the process from beginning to end," he says. "As a judicial assistant, she assists the judges and the defender of the bond in preparing their written statements and considering the arguments for the case."

He cites her understanding of the process of law, and her formation as a religious sister with understanding of theology and ministry in the context of church.

"She's a terrific gift in that way," says Father Mike. "We're certainly blessed to have her. The whole Benedictine spirituality has a unique impact on the process because when you are already conditioned to do work and prayer linked together, it sets you up to do that in this arena. Before we work on any case, we pray for the parties involved. If you're Benedictine, you're already bringing your prayer life to bear on that. It certainly is a great fit.

"I personally am blessed by (Sister Celeste). I don't always say it, but it's true." ■

**Sister Celeste with Coral, age 3, the daughter of a hotel manager in Uganda, Africa.**





## Sister Kathryn connects today's moms with Gospel moms

There was one revelation after another for Tish Cronin at Sister Kathryn Huber's recent "Moms in the Gospels" talk at Fatima Retreat House in Indianapolis.

Cronin was one of 16 mothers who hung on Sister Kathryn's every word at the latest program in their "Morning for Mom" series.

Sister Kathryn chose four Gospels to discuss, beginning with Luke's story of the supportive relationship between Mary and Elizabeth, representing a young mother and an older mother.

"The world is full of 'Elizabeths' who support others," she said. "Please share at your tables about the women who have been 'Elizabeths' in your life."

In her group, Tish talked openly of losing a baby to a miscarriage, of her issue with infertility, and her challenge of being impatient. When Sister Kathryn walked over and joined the table discussion, Tish told of meeting a lady, Lynn, in her parish who was such a comfort to her during that trying time.

"Lynn told me when I lost the baby that it was a baby problem, not a mommy problem," said Tish, now a mother of four. "She reassured me that it was God's plan and that I would be a mom someday."

Sister Kathryn had Tish tell her story to the entire group. But Tish inadvertently left out the word "reassured" in that description and Sister Kathryn was perceptive enough to catch it.

"The word you used when you told me the story, you said she 'reassured,'" said Sister Kathryn. "That's what Elizabeth did for Mary in this Gospel story."

And that's when the revelations started to dawn in Tish's mind. She didn't remember using the word "reassured," but readily agreed Lynn had done so, saying "there was just grace in there."

**Above: Tish Cronin (left) enjoys a moment with Sister Kathryn Huber. Tish said a question Sister Kathryn posed during her talk revealed to her how a woman acquaintance years ago "gave me the gift of patience, really, from God."**



"I felt God's presence in (Sister Kathryn) saying to me, 'you said she reassured you.' Because I don't think I would have come back to that. I feel that God was speaking through her to me. I love when a presenter can be so relational with people and help people to connect their faith and their life. The (Gospel) story she was telling was causing me to reflect on my past. You can miss God if you don't take time to reflect."

Tish thought it was cool to have somebody like Sister Kathryn "who can draw all that out of you and help you focus through things." Tish focused on Lynn's long-ago reassurance and realizing now how it helped her cope through her impatience amidst another four years of waiting before she delivered her first child. "How I went through that so patiently for four years is kind of miraculous," she said.

Later, Tish, near tears, told Sister Kathryn, "I am the most impatient person in the world. I never really considered Lynn and what her reassurance did for me, but I think it gave me patience, because we decided early on that God was our fertility specialist. We just waited. We were patient, and that is so not me. I never would have thought back on that without the question (you) posed. I think that is such a beautiful thing that I'm going to take away from here today."

Among the other take-aways for the mothers were the many stories and observations Sister Kathryn shared from her experiences, often touched with emotion and humor, that related to the "Moms in the Gospels" she presented.



There was the busy mother who put Jesus in the passenger seat of her car and talked to him while driving to and from work.

Or the Gospel that had one of Jesus' conversion moments, with Sister Kathryn reminding that Jesus was fully human, too.

Or the mother of 16 who used her wash-line as her line to God.

Sister Kathryn feels we gain great theological truths from children and encouraged the mothers to listen intently when their children talk about God.

She mentioned the word "compassion" originated in the Hebrew language, meaning "womb" and "love," like the mother's love for the child in her womb.

She talked of the beautiful ministry of being a mother. Of the joy, tears, compassion, and support that go along with it.

And as she spoke, faces were transfixed on her. There would be an occasional knowing smile, a nod of the head, a giggle, a tear.

Another mother, Emily Sagor, said, "It was clear Sister Kathryn did a reasonable amount of research, and put a lot of care into the presentation. That made it well worth coming here. I'm walking away with new thoughts. I also liked that she gave us an opportunity to share."

Tish, who didn't realize there were that many mothers in the Bible, was grateful "to get a whole morning of that; there's a lot to be gleaned from them, there's so much richness there."

Another participant enjoyed the different traits of the Gospel mothers: humility, boldness, compassion, persistence, the grieving, the loving service, yet noticed the hopefulness and lessons in all of them.

"These women of the Gospel are wonderful mentors," Sister Kathryn said. "They show women's ability to interpret God's Word, to know God's ways and reliably communicate them."

"And think of the 'Elizabeths' in your lives. We all have them. God places people in our lives who can comfort us and reassure us."

Sister Kathryn could well have been talking about herself. ■

**Sister Kathryn Huber (far left) shares a story about mothers she's known at a "Morning for Moms" program in Indianapolis.**



## RCIA lesson: Does God speak to the pope more than to you?

Levi Schnellenberger, a permanent deacon at St. Joseph Church in Jasper, Indiana, has been helping with that parish's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) program since 2006.

So he's witnessed a lot of very good, successful RCIA efforts at that parish, the second largest in the Diocese of Evansville.

But he called the January 26 RCIA retreat presented to about 140 people at Evansville's Catholic Center by Benedictine Sister Kathy Bilskie "the best one I've been to."

"She gave time for reflection, and time for silence. That's good. People need that," said Schnellenberger.

"Sister Kathy did a very good job of explaining things, and was very down-to-earth with all of us. Everybody was very complimentary."

Donna Gish, the Catholic Center's assistant director of the Office of Catechesis, said, "The Diocesan RCIA Committee commented that the way Sister Kathy led the group into silent reflection was very good. The participants actually listened and took time for reflection. This doesn't always happen. So her instructions into that reflection time helped the participants reflect, be still, and listen to God."

The Diocese of Evansville annually sponsors a day-long retreat for those seeking to become Catholic through RCIA. This year they chose Sister Kathy, a member of the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand, Indiana, for over 45 years, to lead the retreat.

Her focus was to show participants how to continue their relationship with God after the retreat. Among the worthy tools she explained were silence, reading scripture, and participating in Mass.

"God's first language is in the quiet," she told the crowd. "It's difficult to be quiet and listen. Sometimes God is speaking in the quiet. We're not used to that."

She gave the group 20 minutes of quiet time, to "put yourself in God's hands, to believe in God's presence." And to think of their trip to the retreat, what they saw and felt, and if God was in any of that, and what was God saying.

"You will be in a relationship with the Divine, and that's about as good as it gets," said Sister Kathy.

"I think RCIA is a direct gift from God. RCIA brings this church life and energy, and inspiration. There's nothing like a little dose of healthy energy and questioning that keeps us moving."

She talked at length about the wonders of building a relationship with God. And how it's already started by the participants joining the RCIA process.

**Above: Sister Kathy Bilskie explains how to listen to God at an RCIA program.**



At an RCIA retreat, Sister Kathy Bilskie compared packing a suitcase for a trip to being prepared for the RCIA journey.

"Do you actually think you're here by accident?" Sister Kathy asked the crowd. "I think that was God speaking to you. You have been called by God just as much as Moses was. God has a foot in the door of your heart, and God's going to keep talking to you."

"Maybe you think God doesn't talk to you. Sometimes we think, OK, God talks to people in the Bible, maybe to the TV evangelists, and God speaks to the pope. Yes, God does speak to the pope. But God doesn't speak to the pope any more than God speaks to you."

And Sister Kathy showed the group how to recognize God's voice. Be aware of the people and objects around you, because God can speak to you in anyone and anything. But you have to talk to God and other people, and you have to listen to God and other people.

There are a variety of ways one can move toward God. Through a child. A parent. Nature. A prayer form. Or the Bible, composed of various books inspired by God.

If a person stays with scripture long enough, Sister Kathy says 99% of the time God will speak through it and touch something in your life. The key is what one does about it. Sometimes it's as simple as remembering that God is with me, and God loves ME.

Mass was noted by Sister Kathy as a very special prayer of the church, and a vital piece of the relationship with God. "Mass helps prepare us for life outside," she said. "And our prayer life outside helps prepare us for mass. The mass helps you with your spiritual journey. So pay attention. It's important."

Sister Kathy Bilskie shows her suitcase contents to the RCIA retreat audience, then talks about the tools needed for the journey to become Catholic.

"Mass is a party, and God is the host. And God serves us the best of all food, the body and blood of his son, Jesus. God speaks to you in the mass, so don't miss the opportunity."

Sister Kathy noted we all want to live life to the fullest, but to do that, we need to be as close to God as we can.

"There's nothing anyone can do to make you join the church, or be a practicing Catholic. It's up to you and God. God's going to be there, and it's so much nicer if we just reach out and grab hold."

So talk to each other. And listen. God is always there, waiting. ■





# “A Benedictine Conversation” lights up 14 monasteries

Sister Karen Joseph had been dreaming of igniting some genuine discussion about the current Benedictine lifestyle with other women religious for over 15 years.

When it happened recently at “A Benedictine Conversation,” a five-day event at Monastery Immaculate Conception in Ferdinand attended by 39 Benedictine women, her spark had lit such fire and energy in the group that they gave the presenters a standing ovation at the conference’s end.

They took a serious look at Benedictine history, why communities declined in the past, what they could learn from it, and then how to re-focus the Benedictine tradition for the current day.

The relevance of the topics was underscored by the attendance, as sisters traveled in from 14 monasteries in 12 states, from North Dakota to New Jersey to Maryland to Alabama to Missouri. Included were seven community prioresses, and presidents of four federations that encompass the United States and Canada.

That’s pretty impressive representation.

“They knew the importance of the conversation,” said Sister Kathryn Huber, a co-host for the event along with the Spirituality Ministry team’s Sister Karen and Sister Maria Tasto.

“I really wanted to talk about the particulars of our daily life,” said Sister Karen. “We strive to live our lives more authentically, so are we being faithful to what we’ve professed to be? The faithfulness to personal prayer, to the common table, to being present with community, to living with what is sufficient.

“It was the beginning of a serious conversation about re-animating Benedictine life.”

Nearly every participant thanked Sister Karen for making the conference a reality. Many noted it “was just what we needed.” That was evident by the highly engaged, animated group discussions at the sisters’ tables between the presentations by Sister Karen, Sister Ephrem Hollerman, and Sister Shawn Carruth.

“I think people were energized because we talked about lifestyle, and our faithfulness to the Rule of Benedict and the Gospel,” said Sister Karen.

A key was reiterating the essentials of the Benedictine lifestyle – an emphasis on prayer, community life, service to the local areas – and then figuring out how to adapt them in today’s culture to give people what they really need.



This group helped make “A Benedictine Conversation” a huge success at the Ferdinand monastery. From left are Sisters Maria Tasto, Shawn Carruth, Kathryn Huber, Karen Joseph, and Ephrem Hollerman.

As Sister Kathy pointed out, St. Benedict never had to deal with smartphones and ipods. So how do sisters intertwine rapidly-changing technology with Benedictine essentials in a healthy and faithful way? When Sister Kathy joined the Ferdinand community, there were 450 sisters and but two telephones and two cars in the whole monastery.

“So it was the right time to recalculate,” said Sister Karen, smiling. “I knew that when I saw how engaged the groups were. The Spirit was at work.”

“The next step is for each participant to return home and, as Ghandi said, ‘Be the change you want to see,’” said Sister Kathy. “We gave each one a card to keep that said, ‘What are you personally going to do differently to enhance your own living of monastic life?’ And hopefully people will continue the conversation back in their communities.”

Another indicator of the event’s success was Sister Cecilia Dwyer, of a Virginia monastery, asking Sister Karen to present the topic out East to three religious communities working together. They want a practical conversation that also motivates and inspires, just like they found at Ferdinand.

“I hope this conversation bears fruit in the lives of the communities that attended,” said Sister Karen. “I hope the Spirit will empower them to just go, so that life is even better than before.”

Sister Ephrem gave two presentations during the conference, “Benedictine Women’s History: Cycles of Decline and Reform,” and “Identifying and Reflecting on Historical Elements of Decline and Reform.”

Sister Shawn’s talk, “Monastery – Marketplace: Two Ways to the Good Life,” dealt largely with coping with today’s major faith struggles.

She referred to the Rule of Benedict as a wisdom document, the need to read it slowly, and that being mindful is its spiritual core. She pointed to Biblical wisdom as “a way of negotiating life.” And that the Benedictine practice of silence is for the sake of listening.

She strongly advised to “be awake and aware, and we need complete focus on God.” Sister Shawn ended with, “I leave you with God’s word to us, ‘Be still and know that I am God.’”

Sister Karen talked passionately to the group about how today’s lifestyle choices will affect the future of Benedictine life. She noted

St. Benedict’s lifestyle of service, of caring about others, of simplicity, sharing, and reverence.

“Benedictines are challenged to do our part to respond to our world’s injustices,” she said. “And always remember that at the heart of our striving to live the cenobitic lifestyle is our search for God.

“We are only limited by our own creativity. Let’s continue our conversation . . . (and) return to our monasteries with the fire of the Gospel and the heart of St. Benedict and St. Scholastica motivating and challenging us to be a light in the darkness for our world.” ■

## Looking for another form of spirituality?



**Sister Anita Louise Lowe shares some Liturgy of the Hours resources with Oblates at a recent meeting at the Ferdinand monastery.**

Sister Anita Louise Lowe told the Oblates of the Sisters of St. Benedict at a recent meeting that most people haven’t been taught that the Liturgy of the Hours is a form of worship that belongs to everyone.

In fact, this collection of prayers, dating back to early Christianity, is actually the official prayer of the Church.

The sisters pray the Liturgy of the Hours together three times daily at their Ferdinand monastery.

Sister Anita Louise explains,

“The idea of the Liturgy of the Hours is it takes us out of clock time and places us into God’s time, eternal time. Through the prayer, we mark that all time is holy, and all time is of God.”

And since many are hungry for some other form of spirituality, she thinks it’s a good time for people to start incorporating the Liturgy of the Hours into their own prayer lives.

Sister Anita Louise quoted an article that stated “the renewal of the Liturgy of the Hours will only become a reality if it’s a grassroots effort. The people must call for it, embrace it, and promote it.”

She encouraged the Oblates to help promote the Liturgy of the Hours as the prayer of the whole Church.

She said, “Because you are embracing Benedictine spirituality in your everyday life, not living in a monastery, but as dedicated lay people who want to embrace that spirituality – who better to help promote this vision of a prayer for the entire Church?”

Sister Anita Louise then suggested a few ways to start the movement:

- Most parish meetings begin with prayer; why not a simplified version of the Liturgy of the Hours?
- Pray the Liturgy of the Hours yourself. Perhaps with your family, a friend, or with other nearby Oblates.
- Ask your pastor, or your parish council, if the Liturgy of the Hours could somehow be used more.

She also shared some print and online resources for the Liturgy of the Hours:

- The book *Benedictine Daily Prayer*, published by Liturgical Press, was compiled for Oblates, by Oblates, as a complete, simplified version of the Liturgy of the Hours.
- *Magnificat*, a monthly periodical offering daily Morning and Evening Prayer and the readings for the Mass.
- *Give Us This Day*, a Liturgical Press monthly periodical with similar content to *Magnificat*, but with a Benedictine flavor.
- [www.divineoffice.org](http://www.divineoffice.org), a site offering both free text and a podcast of the Roman Divine Office for every day.
- [www.ebreviary.com](http://www.ebreviary.com), a site offering daily Liturgy of the Hours in Adobe PDF formats.
- [www.universalis.com](http://www.universalis.com), probably the broadest site, offers a multi-year liturgical calendar, Liturgy of the Hours, and the readings for Mass.

Oblates of the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand are Christian women and men from all walks of life who associate themselves with the sisters to enrich their way of life. They desire to share the prayer and work of the monastery in order to spread the spirit of St. Benedict. For more information about Oblates, call 812-367-1411, ext. 2827, or send an email to [oblates@thedome.org](mailto:oblates@thedome.org). ■



## Sister, 82, runs old folks' home in Peru

Most of the residents of the nursing home in Morropon, Peru, don't even exist in the eyes of the Peruvian government.

They were born high in the surrounding mountains, in places only accessible by foot. There are no doctors there, virtually no money, and certainly no birth documents.

Now unable to take care of themselves, these old folks end up in the Home of the Resurrection, a nursing facility run by Sister Mary Leah Baehl, a Ferdinand Benedictine who has been ministering out of the sister's monastery in Peru since 1977.

"They are people who don't have anything," says Sister Mary Leah. "They don't have anybody that looks out for them, nobody cares for them, nobody wants them."

Nobody, that is, except Sister Mary Leah. The nursing home depends on her.

The nine residents have no money to pay the nursing home. And since they have no birth or citizen documents, they get no government benefits.

But they have Sister Mary Leah. She's devoted herself to raising the money to keep the nursing home afloat. It doesn't matter to her that at age 82, she's older than most of the residents.

"We laugh about that, but it's OK, I'm healthy and they're not. They

didn't have what I had," she says softly. "They didn't have a home like I had."

Two of the residents are blind, one has been in a wheelchair his entire life, one man takes his baths in a river, some have had no schooling whatsoever.

Sister Mary Leah agreed to be the treasurer of the home in 2000. She was already the justice of the peace, was involved in other organizations in town, and taught English to various students at the monastery. She thought she could help the nursing home, too, thinking it wouldn't be much work. It's turned out otherwise, but she's not complaining.

"I enjoy my work. As long as I'm busy, I won't get in trouble," she says, laughing. "I feel sorry for people that say they're bored with life. I can't understand that."

What she does understand is the need to pour a lot of energy into helping the nursing home residents.

She organized dances and bingos, and started operating a small store with financial help from her brother, selling cleaning supplies,

**Above: Sister Mary Leah Baehl greets a resident of the nursing home in Morropon, Peru.**





Sister Mary Leah and Sister Kristine Anne Harpenau outside the front of the Morropon nursing home.

Her love for the Peruvian people is more than evident.

She recalls the difficulties of arriving there 35 years ago and not knowing the Spanish language. But she persevered, to the point where now nearly everybody in the town of about 10,000 knows her.

She says she still makes mistakes with the Spanish language, and is humbly grateful for the people's "acceptance of my limitations." Considering how much she gives of herself to the town, it's highly doubtful her language challenges are a problem for the Peruvians.

Parents still tell her, "My kids used to always say, 'there's the sister that likes us,' or 'Sister, when you taught us English, we learned it.'"

Sister Mary Leah shrugs.

"You don't know you're making an impact on people. I just work. I don't look if what I'm doing is making any difference or not, it's just what I think has to be done. I just keep working," she says.

Well, sister, your efforts do make a difference, and they always have.

Her eyes brim with tears. "The people love me, and I love them. I really do," she says, her voice cracking. ■

soap, and food items, to raise money to pay nursing home expenses. She's been helped by continued donations of items from a local women's club made up of former students of hers at St. Rita's School in Morropon.

In 2009, the town's mayor took an interest in Sister Mary Leah's work. He orchestrated, through the Rotary Club of Miraflores, Piura, the donation of an oven and a mixer so she could begin a small bakery to make and sell bread to raise more money. In 2010, she used the monetary donations from her 60th anniversary party as a religious to buy a stove, a blender, a scale, a clock, and some pots for the bakery.

Sister Mary Leah helped form a company of 10 women to make various breads, including a special Christmas sweet bread. Preparing that bread again in time for the holidays is a priority.

"Our big problem now is getting money to buy more inventory for the store," she says. "We'll have to work long hours to get the bread done, but I think we can make it. If I can have the energy, the other ladies will follow me."

Her determination makes the finding of that energy a good bet.

The back yard of the Morropon nursing home.





# Sister Jane talks consensus to priests

When Sister Jane Becker suggested to the assembled 60 priests that “maybe your experience with consensus-building is not that hot,” several laughed knowingly.

And several priests also knew why a Sister of St. Benedict of Ferdinand was talking about “Coming to a Consensus” at the 2012 Presbyterate Convocation of Evansville Diocesan priests at Clifty Falls Inn near Madison, Indiana.

The event’s organizer, Father Phil Kreilein, Diocese of Evansville director of ministry to priests and continuing education, said the four day assembly’s focus was “to talk more effectively with each other.”

When the organizing committee needed to pick somebody to talk about consensus, Father Phil said, “We immediately thought of the Sisters of St. Benedict. They have been using the method of consensus for almost 30 years. I called Sister Kristine Anne Harpenau for assistance, and she recommended Sister Jane.”

So Sister Jane was on hand to give the priests a better understanding of the sisters’ process of reaching consensus.

She noted the difficulty in resolving conflict, and how the sisters use discernment to make major decisions within the Ferdinand community, such as closing the academy or electing a new prioress.

Among the main points in Sister Jane’s one-hour presentation:

- Consensus doesn’t mean total agreement, but total (or very high) consent.
- Joint ownership of the solution is critical; that comes from all having a chance to give input. Remember each person has “a piece of the wisdom.”

- Don’t compete for the group’s support; work toward a shared decision that meets all concerns as much as possible.
- It’s important to have attitudes of cooperation, openness to new ideas, optimism, and concession for the good of the whole.
- It takes discipline; don’t fuss about the decision afterwards.
- Focus on it being our problem, and we will work it out. The goal is universal acceptance of a workable, if imperfect, solution.

During the question-and-answer segment at the end of Sister Jane’s talk, one priest commented, “We’ve used Benedictine sisters to facilitate our meetings, and it helps. When you use consensus, there are no winners or losers. It takes time, but I am convinced of it.”

After the session, several priests made it a point to thank Sister Jane for her help.

Father David Nunning of Sacred Heart Parish in Evansville said, “Sister Jane is an experienced practitioner, so she was very helpful. It was more than just theory. She can share ideas, then talk on how to implement the ideas.

“It shows that reaching consensus is eminently doable – difficult, but doable.” ■

**Above: Sister Jane Becker delivers tips about “Coming to Consensus” to a group of 60 Evansville Diocesan priests.**

# Finding courage to eat the Gospel

The simple power of Sister Maria Tasto's Lectio Divina workshop lays in how she gets you to believe you can actually do this "Divine Reading" prayer form. What's even better is how much it can help.

Her first reassuring words at the recent program at Kordes Center in Ferdinand, Indiana, were that lectio divina is not an intellectual exercise, and is not about reading and studying the Bible from cover to cover.

It's just picking a Scripture passage and letting the words penetrate and marinate. As we continually reflect on the words of Jesus, we are transformed.

"The transformation happens beneath our consciousness," said Sister Maria. "Like life experiences, the lectio divina experience changes us. When you are engaged in Scripture, you are in a relationship with God. God takes the initiative, and transforms us."

The biggest hurdle is the willingness to be influenced by Scripture. Most of us want to be in charge, and are unwilling to stoop low enough to listen to God. As Sister Maria puts it, "our biggest sin is we all want to be little gods."

That stings a bit. Maybe because the truth hurts. But it's painless to try lectio.

The beauty of lectio is that it's built on God's love for us. Many reli-

gious denominations emphasize fear and guilt, traits difficult to build a relationship on.

"With lectio, we can rest in God's love for us, if we just let it happen," said Sister Maria. "The biggest truth of the spiritual journey is that God dwells within us, that God is working inside us. So we are never alone, no matter what. God never abandons us, and never gets tired."

The most exciting discovery is realizing we already have what we are looking for. Sister Maria said God has freed us to be who God created us to be. Our spiritual journey is discovering the word that we are.

"The key is opening one's heart to God," she said. "And we just need to believe we already have what we need."

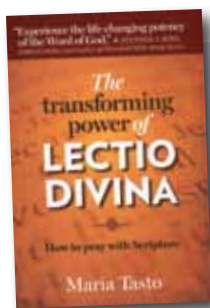
Those words, spoken with so much peace, love, and kindness, followed by Sister Maria's soothing smile, open the gate to the power of lectio divina.

"As we sit with the Word of God in Scripture, we need to let go of immediate judgment," said Sister Maria. "We must let the text speak to us, let it penetrate our blockages. We must ponder it, hold it. Scripture is like a rose bud. It opens in time. We must be patient with it.

"Scripture is always calling us to grow, and we should pray for the gift of courage to hear what it is saying. When we listen to the Word, we can respond in ways we didn't think possible."

Early Christians were encouraged by St. Bernard of Clairvaux to "eat the Gospel," to learn from God who God is.

Sister Maria smiled softly at the reference, saying, "A Gospel has the taste of fresh bread. Sink your teeth into it, for it was baked for you. It's such a treasure we take for granted." ■



Sister Maria's book, *The Transforming Power of Lectio Divina*, is now available at the monastery gift shop, For Heaven's Sake, or on amazon.com.

Sister Maria Tasto talks about the benefits of prayer in her Introduction to Lectio Divina workshop.



Monastery Immaculate Conception  
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## How you can be part of what we do to help others

- 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 (forheavensake.org). 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.