

A Way of Life, A Way of Faith

Benedictines in Central Minnesota

Saint Benedict addresses these words to each of us, "whoever you may be, whatever your circumstances,"¹ since we are invited to participate in the journey to God through the lens of Benedictine vision. Such a vision animates the seven personal narratives which follow, written by members of our two monastic communities. In these stories, we focus on vital components of Benedict's vision: active listening, serving others, seeing God in community, hospitality, and respect for individual persons.

As you read these stories, you are invited to engage the opening words of St. Benedict's *Rule*. "Listen, child of God, to the guidance of your teacher. Attend to the message you hear and make sure it pierces to your heart, so that you may accept with willing freedom and fulfill by the way you live the directions that come from your loving Father."²

¹ *Rule of Benedict* [RB], cf. Prologue 3, translated by Patrick Barry, OSB, *Saint Benedict's Rule*, Ampleforth Abbey Press, York, England, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, RB, cf. Prologue 1, p. 1.

A Formation of Love

Timothy Backous, OSB

"Uncle Tim, is this your car?" asked my 11 year old nephew.

"No," I replied, "it belongs to all the monks."

"Monks? What's a monk? Are you a monk?"

"Yes, I am a monk."

After a ponderous silence he said, "Weird."

I suppose my lifestyle does seem weird to lots of people who see it from a distance. Monasticism is, after all, counter cultural. The norm is to settle down in marriage, rise up in a career, buy a nice house, a couple of cars, and have children. Why on earth would a grown man subject himself to obedience, stability, and something called "*conversatio morum*" unless he was a little bit looney? My friends find it incomprehensible that I need to ask permission to travel. Others think it funny that we never see a paycheck and that all we earn goes to the community. And, of course, there are those who just can't understand why we spend so much time each day in church.

Yes, even to those of us who live it day in and day out, it is a strange way of life. Monasticism is at once challenging and liberating, draining and invigorating. It is a very odd mixture of ups and downs, ins and outs, blessings and curses. To this day, I cannot *fully* articulate what attracted me to its gates or what has kept me here for twenty-three years.

In 1971, I was all set to go elsewhere to college – Alaska, to be exact. In March, my best friend in high school asked me to do a road trip with him to Minnesota to see the college he would be attending. I had heard of this place, St. John's, because many of the priests on our faculty were products of the seminary here and spoke highly of it. We arrived on a Friday evening, which just happened to be the eve of St. Patrick's Day. The campus was lively, to say the least. Spring was beginning its yearly bloom, and the campus was emerging from a very white winter. Everything about the campus impressed me: the lakes and woods, the buildings and the people. But nothing prepared me for my first peek inside the Abbey Church. I remember entering through the baptistery doors, slowly walking down the main aisle and letting my gaze wander upward and upward and upward. The grand scale of this building was a lot to take in for a South Dakota boy. As I reached the altar area and turned around to

see the floor to ceiling stained glass window, my fate was sealed. There was something deep in my soul that understood what this church meant. It was a statement of some sort and it spoke directly to me. There was strength and stability and lasting commitment. There was a boldness to it that captured my imagination and nourished all the contemporary ideas about God and church that my little high school back home had introduced me to. Here was a place that somehow provided a meeting point between the ancient traditions of monasticism and the shifting tectonic plates of modern theology. I stood on a fault line and I was captivated. Of course, all this introspection didn't take place in 1971. At the time, I simply forgot about Alaska and enrolled at Collegeville, convinced that I had found a better place to go to college. But it was that accidental encounter that helped me come face to face with a way of life I had never even heard of much less thought of as one I could follow.

Not infrequently, I'm asked when I made the decision to join the monastery, and I'm always honest in saying I can't remember. I once took part in a panel discussion with young men who were considering a vocation and was mortified to discover how dramatic their stories sounded. One heard voices in the church. Another had visions and dreams. Me? I just sort of stumbled into it, really. I was coming to the end of my senior year and just like every other Johnnie in my class, I was dreading having to leave this place. I had plans to teach, to travel, to volunteer, and maybe go to graduate school. All of that changed one day when one of the monks I knew quite well said, "You'd make a great monk." To be honest, the thought had crossed my mind, but I quickly dismissed it as an eleventh hour attempt to fend off "the real world." But his invitation threw open a door that I couldn't resist entering. My plan was to give it a try, which, by the way, is a very nice feature of this life style. You can try it for up to four years without any life long commitment. Try and pitch that to a significant other.

I entered the candidacy period in 1978 while still a teacher at St. John's Preparatory School. This initial testing was a lot less organized in those days. We would meet occasionally with our "master" who would in turn invite us to hear other members of the community tell their stories. They ran the gamut from practical ("I joined to avoid the war") to mystical ("I had this out of body experience..."), so we all had something to grab onto. There were five of us candidates and of those, only two were resident in the monastery. The remaining three of us lived elsewhere and kept our day jobs.

The process served its purpose for all of us survived and were clothed as novices on a very hot July morning in 1978. The man assigned to us as "master" was an elderly, retired English teacher, Fr. Alfred Deutsch. Being the nephew of the late, great Abbot

Alcuin, Fr. Alfred set about forming us into happy, contributing members. Our life together was a rhythmic combination of prayer and work, meals and recreation, study and sleep. Looking back, I can say with deep certainty that I was in the right place at the right time. His vision of what monastic formation should look like was a simple plan: help these men fall in love with this community, and that plan of action spoke to me. One could tell by the way Alfred carried himself that he had done just that many years ago. It was the unique quirks of confreres that most delighted this man. What many found exasperating, he found exhilarating. A part of *The Rule of St. Benedict* he quoted often had to do with the superior being careful not to scrape the rust from the pot too vigorously for fear of breaking it. Alfred understood that people were fragile. He knew that *we* were fragile. His leniency and forgiveness towards us was a lesson in how we were to conduct ourselves in the larger community.

With simple vows, we moved into what we call the "juniorate" and found ourselves under the watchful and challenging eye of Fr. Ivan Havener. It seemed the poor man could never get a handle on our boisterousness. He was hoping for a hallway filled with meditative young men but instead, got something that resembled a college dorm. We were numerous and lively. There were always some great ideas floating around ("Let's build a Mongolian yurt in the woods!") that just flummoxed the man. He would have preferred us to sit in our rooms and do *lectio divina* or study the New Testament, but he was more likely to find us sitting in large groups laughing our heads off or planning some sort of backyard gathering for the community. It was not unusual for him to wander down the hall to one of our rooms and scold us for being too loud. A quiet man himself, he must have found this painful at times. But like Alfred, Ivan was careful with us. He hated confrontation, and when he was forced into it, he'd place one ankle over the opposite knee and suddenly his foot would vibrate up and down like the wing of a moth. We all suspected he used that gesture to vent his frustration rather than have it come out of his mouth in the form of harsh words.

If novitiate is the boot camp of monastic life, the juniorate is your internship. Everything gets tested – your spirituality, your career, your wisdom but, most importantly, your human relationship skills. We were a cluster of opposites all living in one small area of the monastery, all trying to figure out if we had a future here or not. But it was during these three years that the rubber met the road. All we had studied about *The Rule* and the monastic tradition was put to the grindstone. The process of becoming a monk is engineered to allow the greatest amount of flexibility imaginable but, when it comes time to consider your life long commitment, there is no wiggle room. The theory had to have some basis in reality or you packed your bags. In my case, Alfred's vision and Ivan's refining helped me

arrive at a decision to stay. I had fallen in love with my community and felt that I could make some kind of contribution to its already long and storied history.

That contribution was not to take the form I had expected, however. Instead of the English professor trajectory I had hoped for, the abbot asked me to consider a radically different path. In 1984, I found myself in Rome, Italy on my way to ordination. Shortly after that, though I was longing to return to Collegeville, the abbot asked me to consider a doctorate in Moral Theology. After trying unsuccessfully to argue my way out of it, I remained in Rome for another three years, coming home in 1989 with degree in hand. From then to the present I've been serving the community in unexpected ways – first as recruiter for the seminary and then as chaplain and director of Campus Ministry for nine years.

Indulging in all this autobiographical detail, however, is not to try and convince anyone of how exciting (or dull!) my life has been. Instead, it is to make this point: any monastery is filled with life stories that aren't all dramatic and other worldly. For me, the heavens did not open up, nor did I see rays of light that blinded me. Instead, I found a small piece of the world that seemed pretty sane, that made a significant contribution to the church and the common good and that was populated with interesting people, some monks, some not. I consider myself lucky to have had the superiors I did because their way of doing things spoke to my soul.

I often wonder if young men and women shy away from this counter cultural life choice because they feel their desire to join is nothing more than curiosity and that doesn't seem sufficient. Furthermore, do they feel a need to be holy *before* they enter the cloister gates? If there is anything more certain to monastics, it is that we come to the monastery with our faults in tow. I fear that many rule out our way of life as an option because it seems "above" them. Nothing could be further from the truth. Monastic life is not easy, but it is possible. It calls one to holiness but doesn't demand it. It requires patience, not perfection. And finally, it has an infrastructure to help insure success that Benedict simply calls "the help of many brothers."

I consider myself lucky because when I found this place and its lifestyle, there was nothing pulling me away from trying it for a time, and so I did. That test drive went a few more miles than even I expected. Weird.

Altered in Fulfillment

Dennis Beach OSB

*And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfillment There are other places
Which are also the world's end, some at the sea jaws,
Or over a dark lake, in a desert or a city –
But this is the nearest, in place and time...
T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" from *Four Quartets**

In some ways my experience at Saint John's Abbey confutes T. S. Eliot's notion. I chose to enter the monastery because I loved God, wanted to give my life to this love, wanted to seek realization of this love in my work, prayer, leisure, and companions. I remain for the same reason. Moreover, I remain because, whatever unsuspected realizations I've had about what such a life entails, it seems to be working. Saint John's Abbey is a place to learn how to love God.

However, if I look back now at how and when and why I first came to the college as a freshman in 1974, I find Eliot's reflection more compelling. Then, seeking independence and excitement rather than stability, and considering Saint John's as a toe-hold in what I vaguely conceived to be the "Great Northwest," I had no idea what Saint John's was to come to mean in my life. What drew me to Saint John's must have had something to do with the truth about this place, its being simultaneously for people and for God, but this was a truth that dawned only slowly.

Almost whenever I meet people who find out that I attended Saint John's University, they presume that I came to Saint John's with a purpose: "Somehow you must have known, or at least suspected, that one day you would be a monk." Wrong, I say. "Oh? When did you first think about entering the monastery? On your first contact with the sanctity of the monks? As a result of some inspired course on scripture or the burning issues of theology?" No. The truth be told, I never once during my undergraduate years at Saint John's considered myself to have a vocation, let alone one to be a monk. Within a year after graduation I did, but until then it never crossed

An earlier version of this essay was published in *A Sense of Place II* edited by Colman J. Barry, OSB (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 13-21.

my mind. This reply never fails to astonish, and it seems worth wondering why.

In fact, I first heard of Saint John's as a school with a great wrestling team. That was in the early 1970s, at the end of the Terry Haws era, and Haws' successor managed to recruit the senior co-captain from my high school wrestling team in the suburbs of Chicago to come to Collegeville. As a sophomore I had wrestled behind this all-stater, challenging him every Thursday for the starting slot in the varsity lineup and getting my tail whipped just as often, but he taught me to work hard and I finished the junior varsity season with only one loss. The next year I made it far enough – sectional finals – to think that someone might be interested in having me wrestle at their college, and I arranged to visit another teammate who had moved to the Minneapolis area. I arrived during spring break, and the two of us made the drive up old Highway 152 to see Saint John's.

We reached the campus on one of those spring days that never cease to work their magic in Minnesota. The ice had only days before released the waters of the Sagatagan to sparkle hypnotically in the mid-April sunlight, and at about three o'clock on the afternoon we arrived scores of Johnnies were heading to the playing fields for the annual ritual of intramural softball, either jogging or riding on the seats, hoods and trunks of the dilapidated cars then preferred by the few students who could afford them. It was a scene calculated to bewitch a seventeen year-old dreamer intent on heading West, not East, for college; to a smaller world, not a bigger one; away from civilization, not towards it. The very air seemed to breathe promise of life and discovery, and I succumbed to its spell completely.

My former teammate left Saint John's after one year, and I spent half of my senior wrestling season on the sidelines with a dislocated elbow. I was turning more and more towards academic interests and pushing sports to the purely recreational side of my life. Saint John's, I discovered as I explored the sheaves of college brochures that arrived in my mailbox, fostered both these interests, and it compared favorably in my mind with both the University of Illinois and the University of Notre Dame, my other choices.

Money permitting, I wanted a private college, and Saint John's offered generous financial aid on top of a scholarship I had already received. Of course, Notre Dame was Notre Dame, and I had entertained visions of going to college in the shadow of the golden dome ever since watching Terry Hanratty throw touchdown passes to Jim Seymour when I was in grade school. But as I visited and corresponded with South Bend, something was missing that I had experienced at Saint John's. Notre Dame expected me to be impressed that they were entertaining me, but they never communicated any real feeling of wanting me to come there. In South

Bend I felt that Notre Dame was the important thing; I could ally myself to that importance or not, but I couldn't really expect it to pay much attention to me.

Saint John's, on the other hand, did little things, like exchange through the mail a jersey I had bought in the bookstore that turned out to be too big. Like send me copies of the weekly chaplain's letters because I had expressed an interest in youth ministry. Now I realize that these attentions reflected not merely the gimmicky marketing tactics of a crack admissions crew, but the first signs of a truth about this place that has endured for me for nearly thirty years: I counted. And this premium on the person ran deeper than the kind of superficial personalism that almost any small place can offer compared to a bigger, more prestigious one. It is a value that begins with the monks: Saint John's exists that they might better seek to love God; it is a value that flows from a belief that the truth of human lives resides deeper than the moment and therefore should be served, honored, manifested in the moment, no matter how ordinary.

Of course, Saint John's suffers too from human foibles; it can succumb to the tendency of any institution to nurture its myths at the expense of its realities. And no one knows these foibles and myths better than the monks. Yet, the spirit that I experienced in those early contacts survives and thrives because the central myth at Saint John's is not really a myth at all, but the message of the Gospel. Moreover, Saint John's "myth" is incarnate in the monastery itself, in the attempt to live that gospel message in all the unspectacular everyday ways that life affords: Love one another as I have loved you.

I didn't think in these terms then; I merely understood that I meant more to Saint John's than I did to Notre Dame. I arrived in Colledgeville by Greyhound bus on September 1, 1978, and recall that Saint Cloud that day recorded the coldest temperature in the nation, 32 degrees! What would January bring? I found out. Snow. Twenty-seven inches of it. Enough to stop the Bennie buses in their tracks and force the monks to man the kitchens in place of the dining service workers. The students didn't starve; the monks probably depleted a week's worth of food in the day and a half that they ran things, so worried were they that we'd go hungry.

All of this adds up, slowly, and rather uncomprehendingly, to a force that eventually compelled me to return and make Saint John's my home. My mother, I remember, telephoned Fr. Rene McGraw, the prefect on "Third Tommy" in advance of my birthday to ask him to order a cake and tell her what it cost. He did the first but not the second. We ate the cake in Rene's room, went on to popcorn, and munched that on into the night through rounds of a name-guessing game he called "Botticelli." In only two of my classes that year did I

have monks for teachers – Br. Louis Blenkner in English and Fr. Alberic Culhane in Old Testament. But I got to know others as characters around the place, in the dorms especially. Some monks I knew only by hearsay – horror stories of the pace of "Speedy Bede's" chemistry lectures or Father Bertram's zoology tests. But even the horror stories were good material; they were told of Brother Louis, he of the black habit and rubber beach sandals even in the dead of winter, he who was reputed to tell classes that he would probably give God an A in the class, himself a B, and we should all prepare ourselves for Cs. The story may have been apocryphal; the grading scale was pretty accurate.

As the years went on and I switched from the sciences to English, I got to know Louis better, and also Frs. Alfred Deutsch, Hilary Thimmesh, Pat McDarby, and J. P. Earls, not to mention Mr. Stephen Humphrey, who wasn't a monk but about as close as you could come, and who was as good a guide to the characters in Collegeville as Virgil was for Dante in the *Inferno* Steve so loved to teach. When the new course bulletins came out, about a half-dozen of us at a time would sit in his room listening to advice: "Take Godfrey," "take Rene," "take Alex," "take Chrysostom." Indeed it was uncannily similar to the Latin poet pointing out the denizens of hell to his amazed disciple, while the relish in his voice and the twinkle in his eye hinted that these characters and this place too comprised a kind of divine comedy, a realm where all things signified the wonderful and therefore comic grace of God.

However strong these impressions were and remain, it still seems odd that they didn't cause me to think of becoming a monk myself. True, I had switched majors to English, where even the non-monks seemed vaguely Benedictine. For example, Dr. Eila Perlmutter, who fashioned as formidable a *persona* for herself as any monk and who, with Louis, sits on my shoulder to this day, a literary conscience as I write this essay. For three years I had intended to train as a parish youth minister, but during my senior year I forsook this idea and began thinking of graduate studies and an eventual academic career. First, however, I'd take a year or two off from studies to see something of the world and decide between classics and English. Or so I thought.

Perhaps because I was so immersed in what was good about Saint John's, I didn't realize that it offered what I wanted for my own life as I moved beyond college. As a matter of fact, I didn't actually have much of an idea of what I wanted in my life. My turning away from youth ministry had meant, thus far, an invitation to confusion and rootlessness in matters of belief and experimentation and indulgence in matters of behavior. At first, this freedom seemed exciting, an autonomy unbounded by conventional values.

But as time went on, the sweetness of this dispensation began to cloy. It's hard to say when my disillusion began, but not until it did, did I begin to discover what I have been discovering ever since: how Saint John's nurtures faith, helps me to grow, helps me to love and be loved by God. One night, sitting in front of a fireplace in a rented house in Saint Paul when I had stayed behind from a New Year's Eve outing, I began to take inventory of my life and especially my beliefs. Perhaps I only then discovered that I truly had beliefs. Two years earlier in a youth ministry leadership meeting we spent an evening in teams constructing personal creeds. I remember thinking that too many people seemed almost glibly sure of what they believed. I was more afraid of declaring my faith than any of them – or else they hid fears that we in fact shared. Two years later, staring into the flames, I began to realize that I really did believe. In what, I didn't exactly know, although I felt sure it had something to do with God and the Gospel, with Jesus Christ and sin and grace and redemption.

But what really seems to have come to me that New Year's Eve is the fundamental intuition that the question, "How do I believe in God?" would occupy me for the rest of my life. Furthermore, I knew that the most of the world in which I lived either frowned contemptuously on such weak-willed soul-searching or smiled indulgently as one would at an idiot child, "There but for the grace of – something, not God – go I." Today, my judgment of the world around me world seems unfairly harsh; after all, I met two of my best friends during this time. However, then the world did appear to me in rather dire terms. I also knew I couldn't pursue this question in any born-again, personal-Lord-and-Savior way; I had a penchant for intellectual and unsentimental inquiry, at times a cynical streak, and I knew that my pursuit of God would have to make room for such baggage, checked as it was for the duration.

As I mentally catalogued what I would require to be able to live this question, Saint John's appeared to me almost corporeally. Here were people committed to the same search, people who lived the question of God neither simplistically nor contemptuously, but honestly, daily. In a strangely Trinitarian way, Saint John's not only embodied a fundamental respect for the life of the mind; it kept in mind an equal respect for the life of the body, all the while remaining dedicated to the truest life, the life of the spirit. I sensed Saint John's then not as a kind of greenhouse nursery for life, but a place where one might – where people did – live life itself.

One of the things I remembered that New Year's Eve in front of the fire was a senior seminar class in which we discussed the medieval tale of *Gawain and the Green Knight*. I had presented a paper for the class, but what I remembered was a comment by Fr. Hilary Thimmesch (all available English faculty attended the seminar

classes) about how, in the old days, seasons of the year and the liturgical cycle had been marked so concretely in the monastery's way of life.

A little review. The tale of Sir Gawain recounts the Christmastide feast at which the Green Knight appears to challenge the chivalry of Arthur's round table. Gawain takes up the challenge and deals the knight what should be a death-blow; however, the Green Knight miraculously survives, reminds Gawain to seek him at the Green Chapel a year and a day hence to receive an answering stroke, and gallops from Camelot, literally holding his severed head in his hands. As Gawain passes the coming year, the poet recounts the passing seasons: Yuletide that gives way to "the crabbed Lenten" fast, in turn replaced by the "sweetness of the soft summer," harvest with its warning to "wax to ripeness," until finally Michaelmas brings the year full circle to winter.¹

Hilary spoke of the symbolic way in which the monastery table, for example, was stripped during Lent of all but the basic condiments – salt, pepper, sugar. Jellies and syrup succumbed to the general fast but came back in glorious style on Easter morning, which still features pancakes and waffles with fresh berries and whipped cream. Brother Louis recalled the pared down music of the Lenten liturgies, with a capella singing the rule until the organ erupted in the thunderous Alleluia of the Easter Vigil. Though Hilary and Louis spoke even then of a bygone era, one that even the most romantic soul would admit had as many glitches as glories, something in the practices spoke to me of a conscientious effort to symbolize basic truths of the human experience, especially the spiritual dimension of that experience.

It is this conscientiousness about how we live our lives that I recalled as I stared into the fire on New Year's Eve, appropriately the day when Gawain prepares to receive the return axe blow of the Green Knight. Moreover, I recalled people whom I respected, people who had given their varied lives to a common endeavor, the search for God. I didn't think about *The Rule of Benedict*; I was hardly familiar with it, but I did think of monks whose lives embodied that rule without reducing it to a repressive uniformity.

When I first talked to Fr. Julian Schmiesing, then vocations director, and listed for him the monks who had influenced my interest in monastic life, he was amused that I could mention Father Alfred (then rector of the seminary) and Brother Louis (an independent and sometimes irreverent cuss) in the same breath. He knew what I could only guess: such variety is the rule rather than the exception in

¹ The quotations are from a modern English translation by J.R.R. Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

monasteries. His smile signified not laughter at my naïveté but approval that I had somehow accepted a heterogeneity I couldn't yet understand.

I entered the monastery as a candidate in 1981. One night during the first week, I was scanning the newspaper between supper and evening prayer when Fr. Dunstan Tucker introduced himself to me. Eighty years old then, Father Dunstan was spoken of with reverence and awe even by those I had held in reverence and awe – as a teacher, a scholar, dean of the college, coach of the baseball team. After introducing himself, Father Dunstan said he hoped I would be patient "with us." He went on, "We can be a little daunting at first, but once you get to know us, we're really very human." He spoke the words with reverence. That spring and summer I watched him tend a small but spectacular flower garden just off the back porch of the monastery, a task he approached with the care and patience he must have given to his Dante scholarship. Concerned with the repositioning of flagstones near his garden, he wouldn't bring himself to criticize another monk's deplorable taste, but said instead that he "disagreed with his aesthetics."

Twenty years later, more realistic about the life of the community and more aware of the blemishes and bonuses of personalities, I find these impressions only growing stronger. I watched Father Dunstan stand, on All Souls Day, at the grave of Fr. Conrad Diekmann, offering a silent prayer. Then I stood by his own grave as his body was brought to rest with the colleague and brother he loved. And later on I myself stood on the grave of Fr. Otto Weber who died suddenly, in the midst of his busy career at the Prep School, not so much praying as cursing: "Otto, what the hell are you doing in there? We've got work to do!"

Both my own parents' fathers died before I was born, but at the age of twenty-five, entering the monastery, I could still learn for the first time how a grandfather indulged a grandson. At thirty-five I was still one of the "youngsters" and at forty-five, I'm beginning to see some people I have taught come back themselves to knock on the door and seek entrance to the monastic life here. One of the most wonderful things as I entered was finding monks who were once my teachers or distant figures in the procession become confreres, colleagues, friends, heart and soul companions, and now I find myself recapitulating that transformation for others.

Teaching helps keep me young too, and I love being able to quote Hamlet from memory to one student, help another discover the wonders of asking deep philosophical questions, yet find time to tip another's frisbee toss three times before catching it behind my back – in habit! If some day graduates think of me and decide that one

can love God *and* love life, I hope I'll have helped keep alive what Saint John's meant for me.

I remember that Eliot says even what I thought I came for will be "altered in fulfillment." Monks whom I didn't know or had never seen are now brothers. Those I entered novitiate with are close companions. I sing full-voiced in choir as I hadn't done since fourth grade when Sr. Rose Nicholas told me to "mouth the words." The daily current of psalms, a far-off mystery in college, washes over me again and again, my own voice part of the rhythm that sustains us all.

While I can't say that I've learned to prefer nothing whatever to Christ, I think that I have at least begun to run on the path of his commandments, have felt in small measure my heart overflow with the inexpressible delight of love. That, after all, is what Saint Benedict asks of and promises his monks:

"May God, who has begun this good work in you, bring it to perfection."²

² From the monastic profession liturgy.

Dome and Sky

Nancy Hynes, OSB

The green chapel dome against blue sky made me cry.

It was 1955. I had just graduated from the College of Saint Benedict and I did not want to leave.

I did not want to leave the five-story brick building we called home – Main Building today – the only building then.

How could I leave the dining rooms with their elegant polished floors and mirrored buffets; the wood-panelled library with parquet floors and wrought-iron gates inscribed with the Benedictine motto, *Ora et Labora*. How could I leave daily Mass in the Baroque chapel and the nuns' chanting psalms singing in my ears as I left through the chapel walk to breakfast?

I did not want to leave campus singers, choir concerts, Johnnie-Bennie plays and operas, winter formals and military balls; the intellectual stimulus of the clear philosophy lectures by Sister Enid Smith, the brilliant teaching of Sister Mariella Gable and all the English professors, the sacramental theology of Sister Mary Anthony Wagner. I had had twenty-five professors over the four years; two were single women and two were priests; the rest were sisters. They were my best friends. How could I leave them?

The morning of my graduation I separated some of my dozen graduation roses and took them to my favorite sisters, wandering up and down the worn marble steps, gazing out windows at green grass, pines, and the statue of St. Joseph. I climbed four flights to the roof (where we sunbathed and smoked illegally) to look south over the two cemeteries – town and convent; the summer house, the lily pool, the tree-lined grotto walk, and the beginnings of construction of Mary Commons. I turned north and saw Minnesota Street, Sal's, Ed Schneider's, and further north, the old El Paso. The Bennie bus sat in the parking lot.

So much for the nostalgic, romantic view.

The realistic view? I couldn't wait to graduate! I had to get outta there!

I had *had* it with rules and regulations, rising education costs from (\$400 for first year to \$2,000 senior year!), living with six people in a dormitory and common bathrooms down the hall.

I wanted my own room, my own money, my own life.

Engaged to be married to a Saint John's graduate, I taught senior English at Windom High School in southern Minnesota, earning \$3,450 a year. My fiancé was a Navy officer, so we planned a beautiful wedding, he handsome in his whites and I lovely in my mother's twenties wedding dress. We would have children – about five – and I would continue to teach. My life was arranged.

But something happened on the way.

Call it what you may – God's call, God's will, God's plan. I heard God's voice through Thomas Merton's autobiography, *Seven-Story Mountain*. I heard it in Sister Linnea Welter's letter which cautioned that if I had any doubts about marriage, I should think them through. "After all, you cannot enter the convent *after* you're married" – though several widows have changed that notion now. I heard it in my longing for God and Saint Benedict's – a place of hospitality and service – the center of which was Sacred Heart Chapel, daily Eucharist, and the Divine Office.

I listened to the strong inner conviction of my heart, and the following year, this time to enter the convent,¹ I returned.

I returned – to follow God's call.

I returned to study, to pray, and to serve God's people in the Benedictine way.

I returned to join a community of strong women – nurses, teachers, social workers, homemakers and cooks; weavers, candle makers, potters, and needleworkers; pianists, painters, scholars and researchers.

With these women, I faced the struggles of a changing community responding to the "signs of the times," the Sister Formation Movement, Vatican II theology, and the sixties turmoil when many nuns, monks, and priests left religious life.

With these women, I pondered the mission challenges in Puerto Rico, the Bahama Islands, Taiwan, Japan, Brazil, and in the States: Indian missions at Red Lake and White Earth, Minnesota; the selling of our hospitals and nursing homes; the unique cooperation of two Benedictine colleges, the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University.

¹ "Convent" was changed to "monastery" in 1995, more accurately describing our historical roots.

With these women I have taught hundreds of young women and men, exploring the riches of literature and the possibilities of writing. My first-year symposium class opens doors to their understanding of global issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in the context of the Church's social teachings.

As the number of College sisters dwindled in the 1970s, scores of dedicated single and married scholars, men and women, from a variety of religions came to teach and learned to love the values of Benedictine life – liberal education, hospitality, community, peace, stewardship of environment, prayer and work. It is a privilege to work with them.

With Benedictine women today, I treasure our history; I am awed at the tremendous odds our foundress, Mother Benedicta Riepp, overcame to establish an independent Benedictine community in central Minnesota.

She is our model "for envisioning the transformation of Benedictine life no matter where it is lived, for holding ourselves morally bound to protest and resist structures, laws, and actions that deny the full humanity of women."²

Today the green chapel dome against blue sky makes me grateful.

² O'Meara and Rigby "Mother Benedicta Riepp" 14.

Serving with Gladness

Colman O'Connell, OSB

Several of the most unlikely events (some would say perverse reactions) have prompted me to listen carefully to what I have always believed was an invitation from God to become a sister.

When I was about six years old, I overheard my Aunt Nell speak of her prayers that my sister, Honor, become a Josephite sister. Her prayers provoked me to wonder why Honor and not me. I hesitated to ask Aunt Nell about it, probably not wanting to hear her unfavorable comparison of me with my older sister.

The excitement of summer school classes in religion taught by Servite sisters also prompted me to think occasionally about the possibility of being a sister. The Servites, specialists in conducting vacation school in religion for rural children, were wondrously gifted teachers. They could make all-day classes in religion seem varied and fun. They succeeded in enriching parish life for generations of children in rural Wisconsin.

Not until 1945, after 12 years of public school, when I came to St. Benedict's, did I seriously weigh the idea of being a sister. The Benedictine presence in all of our class rooms and residence halls allowed us to recognize their intellectual acumen, their administrative skill, their personal graciousness, their attractive spirituality, and their collective ability to do truly great work for the Church and society. Best of all, for me, they appeared to be a varied group of interesting and even flawed human beings like the rest of us. They lacked any taint of the "nice" sister stereotype featured in fiction and movies.

Because I loved college life, which differed sharply from high school, I began to think about finishing my degree and then inquiring about joining the Monastery. My decision not to wait, but to enter the monastery as a sophomore, was prompted, oddly enough, by my mother's response when I told her about these evolving plans. Mother's refusal to even discuss the issue prompted me (in some grasping-at-independence way) to join the community when I returned to school as a sophomore, a decision I have never regretted.

It is good to live with people who share the same goal: to seek God. And it is good to live with people who are willing continually to grapple with how we will live out that purpose in daily life. For me, the changes in community life, which we were free to make in the

wake of Vatican II, were refreshing and life-giving. The use of English in the liturgy, the discontinuance of wearing a medieval style garb, a more flexible *horarium*, all made life more real and rich.

Working in the College of Saint Benedict as a Professor of Theater, Alumnae and Annual Fund Director, Director of Planning, Executive Vice President, President, and recently as Vice President for Institutional Advancement have been the ideal work and ministry for me. All of those roles have allowed me to play a role in the life of two colleges which I know help daily to transform the lives of hundreds of students each year into energetic, dedicated servants of God.

Invitation to Grace, Friendship, and Community

Emmanuel Renner, OSB

As I look back on my life, I think I was struggling with the idea of a vocation to a religious community since my high school days. But the actual decision to join a group of women religious didn't come for several years.

I grew up in Walker, Minnesota, and attended public schools there. However, at the invitation of my grandparents and the approval of my parents, I chose to transfer to the St. James Academy in Grand Forks, North Dakota, for my last two years of high school. Living with my grandparents during that time probably had as much to do with my spiritual formation during those two years as did attending a Catholic school. My grandparents' example encouraged me to attend the daily Eucharist, a practice that continues to be part of my life. And being in Grand Forks at St. James brought me into contact with women religious for the first time. The Josephite sisters, who taught at the Academy, were good teachers and helped me develop disciplined study habits.

In 1944, I graduated from St. James. At that time, in the midst of World War II, I didn't have any strong desire to attend college immediately, although I assumed that after the war I might do so. I worked in Bemidji at a government rationing board for a year before deciding to attend the College of Saint Benedict.

The Benedictine sisters' presence in the classrooms and residence halls gave me an opportunity to get to know and respect them. Their dedication to learning instilled in me a love of learning that I have never lost. Various sisters in both high school and college talked to me about the possibility of my having a religious vocation. My response to these conversations was always the same – I insisted that I didn't want to join a convent!

It wasn't until after college graduation during the year I worked in Washington, D.C., at the National Catholic Bishops Conference, that I finally took seriously the issue of a call to religious life and a deeper relationship with God. After work one day, I stopped in my neighborhood church for a short visit; "Why am I fighting the invitation?" I asked myself. Giving up the fight, I decided then and there that I would enter Saint Benedict's Monastery. Two seemingly minor events influenced that decision. The first event took place celebrating New Year's Eve on Times Square in New York. As I stood in the crowded, glittering Square, I remember feeling that if this is all there is to the "good life," something is missing. The

second event, which also occurred during that year, was reading Jean de Cassaude's book, *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*. These seem like two minor actions in my life, but each was important enough to cause me to reflect on my future. I decided very soon to respond to what I believed was God's call to join a religious community. The decision gave me a deep sense of peace that I have never forgotten. Nor have I ever seriously regretted accepting God's invitation to live the Benedictine life.

There are a variety of reasons why I cherish this vocation. I cherish the opportunity to live in community with many women who share the same purpose of seeking God by working and praying together. I cherish participating in the daily Eucharist, praying the psalms and listening to Scripture readings three times a day, and doing *lectio divina* – all of which nourish each of us spiritually and strengthen our commitment to work for the common good of all. I cherish the varied personalities of my sisters and their different opinions about many issues. I cherish the love and respect we have learned to have for each other. I cherish our sense of community and the way we come together to share our ideas and to make decisions for the common good of the monastic community and of the people we serve. I cherish and admire the great talents and abilities of our community members who demonstrated – long before the women's movement in the 1960s – that women are capable of making significant contributions to society.

The call to the Monastery has also carried with it the opportunity to be involved in the College of Saint Benedict. I am proud of our mission as a Catholic liberal arts college for women and the work we do, together with Saint John's University, of helping students grow intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. One of the most delightful times of the year is the class reunion of alumnae in June. It is always a joy to hear about alumnae's personal spiritual journeys, whether as married or single women who are committed to serve others. Some share sad stories of suffering, which are manifestations of their strength in the face of adversity. Others share stories of joy and gratitude. Such experiences provide time to reflect together on the meaning and purpose in our lives and to ask questions in a nonthreatening environment. Alumnae treasure these opportunities to reflect on their own lives, as do I.

My years as president of the College of Saint Benedict were an important part of my call to serve others. These were years that challenged and stretched me and helped me work for the good of the College not just from the perspective of the history department, where I taught for many years, but also from the perspective of the whole. It was a time of learning dependence on God's help and the help of students, staff, faculty, Board members, and other friends of

the College. These lessons served me well when I returned to teaching at the end of my tenure as president.

In 1997, I retired from teaching but I continue to be active in the College in a variety of ways. I love any opportunity to remain involved with students. As a "Benedictine Friend" to several students over these recent years, I have come to know and mentor these young women in a new and different way than as a teacher – and without the added task of having to grade them.

Even in my retirement, I find I'm called to put my love of history – especially the history of the college – and my understanding of the whole institution to the service of the College. Presently, I spend much of my time as a volunteer in the College Archives organizing the documents in such a way that they will be available to those who are studying the history of the College.

Part of this history – one I firmly believe deserves to be told – is the history of our cooperation with Saint John's. I spend time collecting the relevant documents and summarizing the main historic events of that evolution since 1964. It is, in my opinion, a wonderful story of taking "the road less traveled." At a time when men's colleges became coeducational at the expense of nearby women's colleges, our two institutions chose to work through the challenges of cooperation rather than each going coed or merging. As Robert Frost says, "that has made all the difference."

My life these past seventy-five years has been a good one, made immensely richer by living with this Benedictine community for more than fifty years in response to God's gracious invitation.

Hospitality: Opening Up the Place

Don Talafous, OSB

One evening a few years ago a freshman dropped in at my dorm room to fulfill an assignment he had to interview one of the Benedictines. One of his first questions was, "How long have you been here at Saint John's?" Since he was sitting down, I thought it safe to tell him, "About forty years." This 18 year old's response, loaded with amazement, was, "Holy smoke!" After he had recovered a bit, he asked, "Are there others who have been here longer?" There are, and after I had told him that, he was practically speechless.

In my own way I'm impressed by the fact, too. To have found a place and life which, despite unsatisfactory and even exasperating moments, has been so congenial seems to fulfill the desires and hopes of many a person. A happy marriage seems to do the same; a position or occupation, too, which is satisfying and enduring, is similar.

Getting there (or here) was, as I presume most happily married couples can also attest, not always easy or smooth. The unforgettable Fr. Walter Reger arranged for me to come to Saint John's when there were some considerable difficulties to overcome. Once here as a freshman, attending a Catholic school for the first time in my life and going more than three blocks to school, also for the first time in my life, I was very homesick and sorely tempted to quit. The situation taught me a lot about prayer of petition, as well as about endurance and perseverance. My first possible visit home was at Thanksgiving. After returning to Saint John's I began experiencing a growing attachment. I had come here with an interest in religious life. During my first three years, I investigated different types of religious life but finally applied for entrance into the Saint John's monastic community. And forty some years later

As the free spirits or footloose among us (or, probably more correctly, within all of us) would remind us, all this stability and contentment with a life and place means you have closed off other options and at least risk smugness. Does stability equal self-satisfaction?

Many of us at Saint John's, myself included, have had and do have opportunities to distance ourselves from the place and experience other possibilities. My early life as an ordained member of the Saint

An earlier version of this essay was published in *A Sense of Place II* edited by Colman J. Barry, OSB (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 215-17.

John's community brought two years of teaching and parish work in the Bahamas, plus two years in a parish in the Bronx, New York. After returning to Collegeville to be college chaplain and to teach, I spent five summers at The Catholic University in Washington, D.C. After ten years at Saint John's, I went to graduate school in the Berkeley of the late '60s. While there, I was awarded a trip to the Orient to visit and study at Hindu and Buddhist sites; in fact, I had a trip around the world. After another ten years at Saint John's, most of it again spent as chaplain, I had a sabbatical year in Paris and repeated that after another seven years of teaching.

I detail all these movements to suggest that my attachment to Saint John's, its people, and the place, is not simply the result of ignorance of other possibilities, places, and persons. Despite the fact that I cannot imagine a more delightful climate and exhilarating atmosphere than the Bay Area or a more endlessly fascinating city than Paris, I have returned – a number of times now – to Saint John's with the conviction that it is the place where I can grow and work best.

Like any life that involves commitment and a concomitant routine, monastic and academic life also have the danger of not only becoming smug but also dead and lacking in innovation, closed to change. Despite my own failures in these areas – it is always a battle – I am very proud of the steps Saint John's has taken, especially since Vatican II, to carry out the hopes of the great Pope John XXIII that the Church and its life be updated and made more open and more responsive to genuine, human values in the world around us, especially among Protestant Christians and Jews and even in the other world religions.

The American poet Wendell Berry has a wonderful line to the effect that it is only the impeded stream that sings. The boundaries and promises of a commitment, despite the way they seem to cut off other choices, are what channel and direct our powers and abilities and give us some joy in their exercise. The impediments of a committed life, whether in marriage or religious life, drive us to practice the qualities or virtues of perseverance, forbearance, patience, mutual respect, etc., which otherwise remain simply dreams and imaginings.

Whether we succeed in all these is not as important, it seems to me, as the fact that we stay committed to trying to practice them with *these* people, in this situation, rather than continually running off to supposedly greener pastures (back to that poet – Benedictines do sing a lot).

I can't conclude this without saying that even more than the beautiful setting, the easily accessible woods, it has been the people I've met

and come to know at Saint John's who are absolutely priceless and irreplaceable, from fellow members of the community, living and dead, (among the latter, Frs. Walter Reger, Conrad Diekmann, Michael Blecker, and Ivan Havener) to the students who, fortunately, so often are able to see their relation to us as much more than that of client or consumer to producer or vendor.

For one who has lived in student dorms for many years as a prefect or faculty resident, it's always a delight when the student-Benedictine relationship is not that of inmate and warden. Probably the most satisfying aspect of my academic life at Collegeville has been being able to retain as friends at least some of the extraordinary students who have spent their college years here. Like the many other loving people in our lives, they are signs of God's love for us, these people who light up our life when present and whose memory does the same when they're gone. Conversely, the greatest sadness of academic life at Saint John's is seeing so many students leave year after year and knowing that some of them will never or very rarely be heard from again. Because Saint John's is such a place for us Benedictines, we always hope it's something similar to and for our students and alumni.

Connected to God and Community

Lois Wedl, OSB

I stood at her gravesite on the sixteenth anniversary of her death, July 16, 2002. She was my first mentor and definitely one of the reasons why I entered the monastery! As I stood there smiling, I relived the same warmth that I had experienced when I was in her eighth grade class back in 1945. Smiling, I recalled the special things we did in Sister Ludwina Kopka's eighth grade classroom in St. Boniface Grade School located in what, at that time, was the "little town" of Cold Spring, Minnesota. So little, in fact, that a fifth grade teacher of ours once had the audacity to tell us that Cold Spring was a dying town! I haven't a clue what prompted this pronouncement, but in the minds of a class of provincial ten-year olds, it was unforgivable and totally blasphemous! Little did Sister realize that during the recess that followed, a revolution was being plotted right under her slightly hooked nose. Solution to this insult of hers: we would take her by her veil and throw her out of the window! Obviously, the sentence never was carried out! However, almost as if to spite her, our hometown grew and grew and continues to do so even to this day!

But back to Sister Ludwina, the first of several wonderful mentors in my life. For some reason, she always trusted me with everything and helped me believe in myself. On the rare occasions when another sister was sick and couldn't teach her class, she'd put me in charge of the absent teacher's classroom. Together, we'd come up with some things I could do with the students. When there wasn't time to prepare detailed plans, she'd find a great story that I could read to the class at least as a starter.

In April of that eighth grade year, a classmate and I won the first diocesan catechism contest sponsored by the Knights of Columbus. Sister's beaming smile of pride, her warm hug, and words of congratulations were of much more importance to me than the prize of a \$50.00 scholarship to a Catholic high school of my choice. Incidentally, this scholarship took me through four years of Catholic high school at St. Boniface with \$13.50 left over to pay towards my band instrument!

Sister Ludwina never had trouble finding students to help clean the classroom because we loved being with her. She would tell us about her family and things she used to do when she was young. At times, she'd ask us about our hopes and dreams and I'd talk about becoming a sister. Among the special things she had on her bookshelf was a photo of her nephew, Danny, who was serving in the armed forces at

the time. I remember this photo because I fell in love with it, and after pleading with her, she finally let me take the picture home overnight! Ah, the joys of adolescence!

One lesson I learned from her was told to me in confidence – the importance of being slow to judge others. She shared that she cried most of an entire night when she realized how harshly she had judged one of the girls in our eighth grade class for coming late for Mass. At her rebuke, the student burst into tears and angrily cried, "Do you think you'd always be on time if you had to get up at four in the morning to milk the cows, do all the other chores, and then walk several miles to school?" The pain and guilt Sister felt for her harsh judgment stays with me today and often stops me from judging too quickly.

When I joined the Monastery after high school, my beloved mentor often assured me that she prayed for me each day – and I am sure she did. However, I believe her most powerful prayers for me were said immediately after she died on July 16, 1986 – about a month before I completed my doctoral studies in Ohio.

It was desperation time for me! Two things loomed large: I was scheduled to teach at St. Ben's that fall – just six weeks away (!) and my doctoral advisor was leaving Ohio University for a new position in Gainesville. Time was of the essence! I had all my data for my dissertation collected but nothing seemed to be coming together. Almost miraculously, at the same time Sister Ludwina died, a member of my dissertation committee told me he had just received an article including a meta-analysis of all the research on stress coping resources (my topic). He was to write a response that would be published in the same journal as the article. It was a gold mine! In less than a month, I had my dissertation completed and defended. Coincidence? Possibly. But I prefer to believe that as always, my beloved mentor was there watching over me in that critical moment of my educational journey.

"Why did you join the convent?" "How did you know you should be a sister?" "Did you always know?" "Did you ever want to leave?" Tough questions to answer. I like to counter with, "How did your mom and dad know they should get married?" "Was it love at first sight?" "Did they always seem to know?" "Did they ever think about separating?"

For me, I guess I always knew without knowing that someday I would be a sister. As a kid, I was deeply connected to things spiritual. For me, God was a wonderful person. I knew this because my father was a most loving person; the Blessed Mother was always very real and loving because my mom was a special woman who worked so hard to take care of us kids and daddy. And for good

measure, I had a Guardian Angel named Michael Keith, who was always available to help me when I needed special help.

I loved things spiritual: I hardly ever missed going to devotions on Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons; other givens were rosary devotions at church every night during October and May; stations of the cross on Wednesdays and Fridays during Lent; daily Mass; singing in the choir for every wedding, funeral, or high Mass all summer long. On several occasions, the sister organist and I were the only ones present so we sang everything alone!

In my earlier years, I prayed to turn into a boy so I could be a Mass server. I even got up early on Sunday mornings to go to the 6:00 A.M. Mass hoping there'd be no server so maybe I could serve. Already in the second grade, I had a St. Andrew's Daily Missal that I followed religiously. In fact, I got to know the Latin words so well early on that I could tell if the priest was saying the daily Mass for the Dead, the anniversary Mass, or some other choice just by the first Latin words of the Collect! (I'd have holy cards and ribbons in several places in my missal, ready to flip to another Mass if the Latin words didn't agree with what the priest was saying!)

In the sixth grade, Fr. Giles Nathe, an assistant priest who taught religion in our classroom, called me a walking Missal because I knew the date of every Saint's feast day for the whole year! (A 1940s version of Trivial Pursuit!) Novenas also were part of my life but none of the nine days stuff! I had a little blue booklet with prayers of petition that needed to be said for twenty-seven consecutive days including the recitation of the rosary; these twenty-seven days of petitioning were followed by the recitation of the rosary and prayers of thanksgiving for the next twenty-seven days whether my request was answered or not! Most of the time, I prayed these prayers late at night after I returned from some activity at school and/or after I finished studying late at night.

Becoming a religious is really a lifetime process. Although I had talked to different sisters about joining the convent, much of it was just talk. However, at the beginning of my senior year, I suddenly had to "walk the talk." Sister Martin Fiedler stopped me in the hall and asked me if I was really serious about joining the convent because the St. Cloud Hospital was offering me a scholarship for its School of Medical Technology. I remember the strange feeling I had as I stated verbally for the first time with commitment what my heart knew all along: I told her that I would not be able to accept the scholarship because I definitely was joining the convent in fall. My first "Suscipe" was said.

Part of the process of joining was visiting the Director at St. Ben's, filling out application forms, getting a letter of recommendation

from my pastor, and very reluctantly, purchasing a few nunny things like black stockings for the postulancy. When I asked my pastor, Fr. Victor Ronellenfitch, for a recommendation, he said, "St. Ben's is not the place for you; you should be a missionary." He told me he'd write a letter but that was not where I belonged, that I only was going there because they were the only sisters I knew.

My pastor's hesitancy really began to bother me during the novitiate when I read about the spiritual director's power to help discern the will of God for us. I so loved my life in the convent at St. Ben's, but I worried that if it wasn't God's will, it was wrong that I should be there! Filled with much trepidation because I feared our novice director would send me home packing, I finally got the courage to tell Sister Henrita that maybe I didn't belong at St. Ben's. She was quite surprised and told me that if God wanted me in the missions, He'd see to it that I got there. As far as she could tell, God really wanted me just where I was. Whew!! Interestingly, some fifteen years later, without remembering this incident, as Prioress, Sister Henrita asked me to work as a missionary in Puerto Rico.

I moved from teaching seventh grade in Sauk Rapids to becoming principal and seventh and eighth grade teacher at the age of 24 – and ten years before I had my undergraduate degree. I never had 60 seventh and eighth graders at Holy Angels in St. Cloud, but I did have 59! And just when I figured out how to teach the seventh and eighth grade, be principal, choir director, and director of servers for seven priests, I was sent to Long Prairie where I added being superior to my repertoire.

Vocation-wise, I was a happy camper. God and I and so many persons I lived and worked with in Long Prairie were one happy family. The question: "Did you ever think of leaving" was totally foreign to me. But about this time, the woman who had prophetically told me in the novitiate, "If God wants you to be a missionary, you will be one," paid a surprise visit to our convent in Long Prairie and shocked me with the question, "What would you think about going to Puerto Rico?" (What would I think about going to the moon, to Russia, to Mars???) With but two classes in Spanish and some knowledge of the "Hail Mary" in Spanish, I found myself in a new world filled with wonderful, warm, loving people.

The ten years I lived in Puerto Rico (1964-1974) were years of massive changes in the church, in society, in religious life, and in myself! I was in my early forties and feelings of wanting to be a mother were becoming very, very real! I wanted to be loved by another person in a warm, loving, caring way, and I fell in love. I was frightened by all that was happening within me. I relived the day in my youth when I was riding a big farm mare bareback and began slipping off the animal. I knew there was no way I could stay

on the horse. The only decision I had was choosing my falling-off options: I could either land in a puddle of yucky green swampy water on one side of the path, or land in a barbed wire fence on the other.

At that moment, I felt that same helplessness and I was scared. I was afraid if I didn't leave Puerto Rico, I could lose the vocation I so treasured. But I didn't really want to leave the land and people I loved so dearly. After much prayer, I again turned to my beloved Prioress friend, Sister Henrita. Courageously, I spilled out my heart in a long letter to her. I told her that although I loved the religious life, I longed to be a mother, to have children and grandchildren, and I shared that I was deeply in love. Shortly after I had sent the letter, I so wished I could have it back because I knew she'd have me come back to the States immediately. Days later, I received her response. Instead of telling me to pack up and come home, she told me to be so glad that I was discovering my true womanhood, to delight in being so filled with love, with so much that was humanely good. She begged me to use the gifts that I was blessed with to be even more love-filled, more compassionate – to embrace the whole world and all God's people! She told me not to be afraid but to open myself ever more to all the love God wanted to give through and for all His people. She thanked me for trusting her. Her words were so freeing, so transforming . . . and I thank her today for being such a woman of wisdom and love.

My journey has been long and wonderful. The last part of my journey that I will share was the call I received from another prioress, Sister Evin, after 10:30 at night in 1981. At the age of fifty and not having been in school for years, she wanted me to go to Ohio University to begin graduate work. (I felt like old Sarah and wanted to stand behind a door and laugh!)

Little did I know that I would stay on at Ohio University not just for my master's but to receive a doctorate. What a gift! I came home blessed not only with a degree, but with great friends and new mentors, and the wonderful opportunity to work at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University! But even more importantly as far as my vocation is concerned, by being away from community for five years, I had discovered so many, many reasons for wanting to stay in our beloved monastic community for ever, and ever, and ever.

Contributors:

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