

## Song of Creation: *wisdom*

### A Message from the Prioress

by Sister Mary Forman

#### Wisdom as the Tree of Life

This spring season we ponder wisdom. Wisdom has a long history in ancient cultures. In the Egyptian and Akkadian cultures, maxims of wisdom were intended for youth to learn from their elders and develop basic virtues to live in society.<sup>1</sup> In the First Testament, wisdom, drawing on ancient maxims, is associated with sayings regarding conduct and observations on how to deal with problems in life. "Wisdom is gained by counsel and instruction... [and] comes from association with the wise."<sup>2</sup> Ultimately wisdom is a gift of God intended to understand the deeds of God.<sup>3</sup>

Wisdom, as taught in the Christian scriptures, is the summit of all discernment. In I Corinthians 2:6-16, Paul contrasts the bankruptcy of merely human wisdom with the wisdom God has prepared for those who love God. This wisdom comes from the Holy Spirit, "who alone searches the depths of God" and who helps us "recognize the gifts God has given us" (I Cor 2:12). The spiritual person takes on "the mind of Christ" (I Cor 2:16) and so is able to "appraise everything" (I Cor 2:15). Discernment of spirits is one

1 John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc./London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1965) s.v. "Wisdom, Wisdom literature," 929-930.

2 Ibid., 930.

3 Ibid., 931.

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of the gifts God bestows on different individuals for the sake of the common good (I Cor 12:10). In addition, wisdom is mentioned as the way to know God's will: "we have been praying for you unceasingly and asking that you may attain

full knowledge of [God's] will through perfect wisdom and spiritual insight" (Col 1:9). In Ephesians 1:9, the apostle thanks God because [God] "has given us the wisdom to understand fully the mystery, the plan [God] was pleased to decree in Christ."<sup>4</sup>

In the Rule of Benedict, the monastic leader and the deans are chosen for their positions because of the merit of their lives and their teaching of wisdom (RB 21.4, 64.2). This expression, the "teaching of wisdom" is taken directly from Augustine, who uses the term as a metaphor for contemplation; for him, "wisdom is the highest point of contemplation, the most perfect form of love."<sup>5</sup>

4 John H. Wright, "Discernment of Spirits in the New Testament," *Communio* 1 (1974), 119-120.

5 Adelbert van der Wielen, "Coresponsibility According to the Rule of Benedict," *Cistercian Studies* 9 (1974) 351.

*Continued on page 6*



#### OUR MISSION

Eager to welcome God's transforming power in ourselves and our world, we, the Benedictine Sisters of the Monastery of St. Gertrude, seek God together through monastic profession and respond in Healing Hospitality, Grateful Simplicity and Creative Peacemaking.



## Becoming Wise in Working with the Aged



As the director of St. Gertrude's assisted living floor, Sister Janet Barnard understands both the wisdom the aging share and also the wisdom necessary to care for the aging. On this particular morning she is navigating some perspectives regarding a sister with dementia.

"What is hurting me is that in her confusion she can't remember how much I care for her," explains Sister Janet. That the sister can remember certain details of life but not the context of caring relationships is just one of the areas to navigate in working with the aging. With the St. Gertrude's monastic community in the second half of life, it's clear that these challenges will be a part of the path ahead.

"We learn to make adaptations and recognize limits," said Sister Janet. "We find a way to let sisters age in grace and love, accepting reality. Perhaps we are called to mirror that to the world — that might be one of our ministries."

The St. Gertrude's community is unique in that it can meet the needs of most aging sisters in an in-house, assisted living facility. The Monastery is also receiving grants and other support from the National Religious Retirement Office and Support Our Aging Religious.

Caring for the aging was part of Sister Janet's call to religious life. She left her immediate family in Phoenix, Arizona, for Nampa, Idaho, to help with her grandfather in his illness. Soon Janet Barnard was attending retreats at the Monastery. She recalls being touched by the prayer and

feeling at home with the Benedictine values of tradition and stability. A year later, she entered the community. That was nearly 40 years ago.

"There have been all kinds of intentional communities throughout history but they tend to dissolve quickly. Benedictine monastic life has endured for 1,500 years because the center is God," said Sister Janet. "I have learned to trust that everyone here is doing the best they can to become closer to God."

Sister Janet Marie Barnard has served as a registered nurse (primarily in labor and delivery units) and as director of vocations, employing the wisdom from her own experience to help women discern their true callings. "God's deepest desire for each of us is to be fully human and fully happy," she said.

Sister Janet has also served as director of Mission Integration at St. Mary's Hospital (with clinics in Cottonwood and Orofino). She has taught childbirth classes and assisted with deliveries. She is the treasurer/procurator on the Monastery's leadership team.

"There is something in everyone in this community for which I am grateful. Living a life well here has its impact. This wisdom is in continuing to know what are our strengths. That we are here seeking God is our strength." ✕

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# community



On June 8, we celebrated **Sister Betty Schumacher's Golden Jubilee**. Her fifty years of monastic profession include teaching and currently serving as a pastoral associate at St. Jude's Parish in Redmond, Washington. "We are always challenged to stay in touch with those who are poor and struggling in our midst," she said, "to bring about the vision of Jesus as One Body."



**Blessings to our four new oblates: Karla Neumann-Smiley, Bob Parrish, Earl Aston, and Tamara Lamb.** They each made their oblations after Morning Prayer on Sunday, March 31. Our oblate community currently has 100 oblates, oblate novices, and inquirers. Learn more about oblates at [stgertrudes.org](http://stgertrudes.org).



**It was a springtime of music!** Oblate Kathy Hedberg led Sisters Miriam, Mary, and Barbara Ann in singing Hank Williams' "I Saw the Light" at the first ever gospel bluegrass concert at St. Gertrude's on May 4. Sister Teresa aka Minnie Pearl (center left) was the emcee and the finale was a sing-along of "I'll Fly Away." The Valley Community Singers and Bell Choir performed Easter music on April 28 (lower right). Composer-in-residence Xanthe Kraft (center right) premiered an original Mass setting on March 25.

On April 5, we joyfully celebrated **Michele Byers' 20-year anniversary** as an employee of St. Gertrude's. Michele is an inspired and welcoming presence in the Development Office. "I believe in what the sisters stand for," she says. "I love their Benedictine stability and steadfastness in prayer. In the chaos of life, it is something you can count on."



**Calvin Bakie of the Maintenance Team creates an array of beautiful woodcrafts** that are on sale at the Bookshop at the Welcome Center. There are cutting boards, light plates, toothpick holders, and urns.



## Welcoming Wisdom

by Theresa Henson,  
a Spirituality & the Arts retreat facilitator

*David Chiaramonte shares his journey story during the recent Embracing the Artistic Call retreat.*



The rhythm of the Monastery is slow and steady. The bells toll throughout the day for prayer and Mass. Any work will ultimately be interrupted by the bells and the effect is that the day's tasks are succulent with space and light.

Day after day, these bells have an effect on me where I feel my rough edges begin to decline and the crinkled places start to unfurl. Sister Miriam said the Monastery is like a rock tumbler and we are the rocks. The rhythm and the effect of being in monastic daily life smooths over and makes the ordinary shine.

The bells also delineate time, which defines space. I am coming to believe that space is the essence of hospitality – a Benedictine value that is diligently studied and earnestly expressed by this community. Why? Because hospitality is spiritually essential. In truly receiving one another, offering the gift of spaciousness to each other, we choose to not interfere with the divine presence of healing, wisdom, and inspiration that abounds.

"If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you." (James 1:5) Spirit Center, retreats, and spiritual direction all are dedicated to finding the space to receive the generous wisdom of God. This can come as an interior voice, a radiance from the heart, a conversation with another, a creative challenge, gentle listening from a spiritual director...and the list goes on.

"Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place." (Psalm 51:6) A retreat space, a designated hour of the day, a prayer, and so much more can be that womb where we are taught wisdom.

To walk amongst those who have made a lifetime commitment to the Rule of Benedict in such a wide open, majestic, pastoral setting – I find there is always space for me here. I am received; grounded in an exchange of mutual grace, I am wholly welcomed. There are just fundamental invitations to prayer and community – and these both mediate encounters with the ultimate healer and source of wisdom.

I think Benedict must have known that we are all strange and courageous mysteries that have survived great challenges to be where we are in our lives. He gave simple guidelines for honoring one another and meeting the day's requirements with ample prayer. Simple structures and wisdom teachings help for when we are not feeling particularly wise. To be in the habit of deep and profound hospitality is to celebrate and hold space for that within us all that is coming to life and growing as expressions of God's wisdom. ✕

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Learn more about upcoming  
retreats in the enclosed brochure  
and at [spirit-center.org](http://spirit-center.org).  
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# *care of the land*

## Everything I Ever Needed to Know About Life I Learned From a Tree

*by Sister Carol Ann Wassmuth*

In April we finally received indications all around us that winter was finally calling it quits. The piles of snow receded, the birds returned, and the underbrush exploded in new growth. Now the wild flowers are making their appearance and the hill behind the Monastery is ablaze with color.

As we live near a conifer forest our trees are green all year. But each spring a bright green growth appears on the tip of each branch as the tree stretches outward and upward to capture the sunlight. The moisture from all that snow that we found so annoying in February is seeping into the soil, carrying the promise of new life to our forests and fields. The miracle of spring! These words of the prophet seem so appropriate:

“Lo, I am about to create new heavens and a new earth: the things of the past shall not be remembered or come to mind. Instead, there shall always be rejoicing and happiness in what I create.” (Isaiah 65:17-18)

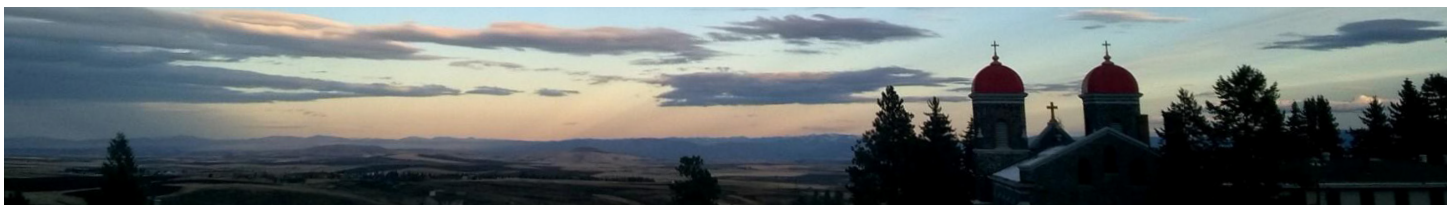
Some years ago I participated in an exercise with a group of friends where we listed all the lessons we could learn from observing a tree. In the end we synthesized our ideas into this poem:

Each tree is unique, but not solitary.  
Surrounded by other trees  
they can survive the harsh wind  
Knowing when to bend and  
when to stand tall and straight.  
By putting down deep roots  
And opening their branches to the gifts of life.  
Where they are planted, they grow.  
Simply by being what they are  
they purify the air and water  
And thereby make life possible on our planet  
In giving of themselves they become themselves.



At the end of each summer trees  
must be ready to let go  
If they want to be renewed.  
There is beauty in the dying leaves  
Nourishment for the future, hope of the spring.  
What appears to be dead is  
in reality the beginning of new life.  
There is wisdom in simply standing  
quietly and listening.  
For what is heard will be the melody  
of nesting birds, of laughing children.  
The sounds of LIFE and LOVE and JOY.

Maybe you can do a similar activity. Carefully observe some part of nature and take time to listen carefully to the lessons. Remember that God was revealed in creation long before the written word was invented. What is this marvelous world telling you today? ✕



If you would like prayer support from our community,  
please call us at 208-962-3224 or  
visit [StGertrudes.org](http://StGertrudes.org)



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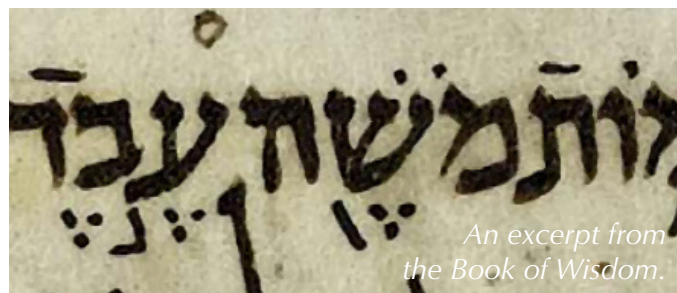
Since biblical wisdom is so intimately connected with discerning God's will, the choice of monastic leader and other officials ought to reflect a capacity to be in touch with God's will and to manifest that will in their service and love of the community.

As a young sister, I often had difficulties in understanding some of the elder sisters for whom I cared in the Infirmary. One of the elders who assisted in elder care was Sister Annunciata, lovingly called "Nuncie." One day after a misunderstanding with one of the older sisters, Nuncie noticed my distress and then said, "Sister Mary, you can learn from every sister in this community. Some will teach you that you can become a bitter, old lady; some will teach you that you can become a gracious woman of God. You choose." That day Nuncie became a wise elder for me, by speaking honestly and clearly about what it means to be a sister.

A memory that stays with me from my early years in community is the "wisdom" meditation and experience, to which our prioress invited us. Several years ago she gathered us together at a house meeting to pray for wisdom. She invited us to listen to the words attributed to Solomon and while we listened we were to allow our hearts to be moved to request one of the gifts of wisdom. She then invited us to ask God for that attribute of wisdom, which God particularly desired each of us to receive. She prayed as follows:

7.7Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called upon God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me. 7.22For in her is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpoluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, 23beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle. [RSV Wisdom 7:7, 7:22-23]

After she read this passage from Wisdom and we each prayed for that gift of wisdom we felt God desired to



bestow on us, she invited us to hold the memory of this prayer in our hearts for a month at least. We were not to tell anyone else what we had prayed for, but to proclaim the gift by how we lived our lives, in mindfulness of what we had been granted. In other words, we were to share the gift by our deeds and by our asking the Spirit to guide the unfolding of the gift. The gift was given to each one, not as an individual, but as a person, that is, as a member of the community. In the biblical tradition a "person" is a network of relationships, of connections, of delicate interactional dynamics with others. It was to be in the living of the gift that we would come to identify wisdom in our midst.

To this day, I never hear this reading from Wisdom 7:22-23 without recalling that experience of prayer in my community. On my good days, that is, on days when I am attentive and alert, I watch for the gifts of wisdom in my sisters. Unfortunately, there are days when I am more aware of my own folly and that of others; yet folly, too, has its lessons to teach us, for we have an opportunity to be humane and compassionate toward what is not yet wise in us.

I invite you, should you choose, to ponder the words of Wisdom 7:7, 22-23, and, in turn, to ask the Spirit of God to grant you that attribute of wisdom God most desires you to live and manifest in your interactions with others. In addition, because gifts continue to grow, like trees in an orchard, you may continue to ask the Holy Spirit to teach you how to be that gift and where it is most needed. Wisdom is personified in Proverbs 3:18 as a tree, as follows: "She is a tree of life to those who grasp her and [one] is happy who holds her fast" [NAB]. ✕



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# *born into eternal life*

## In Memoriam: Sister Miriam Mendez, OSB

April 24, 1946 ~ May 26, 2019

*"There are going to be both the smooth rock and rough rock situations. That's where creativity and prayer come in. One flows to the other."*

Sister Miriam Mendez, OSB, was born into eternal life at 4:23 a.m. on May 26, 2019. She was 73 years old and had been a Benedictine sister for 13 years. Sister Miriam will be remembered for her dedicated and creative work in the Monastery's Archives and Book and Gift Shop, and her love of family and Benedictine life.

Sister Miriam was born in Des Moines, Iowa, on April 24, 1946. She grew up in San Leandro, California. Before moving to Idaho, she lived in Dinuba, California, where she raised her children, worked as a hospice nurse, and was a very involved member of St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church. As her children transitioned into their adult lives Miriam Mendez felt change on the horizon. She realized she was "a 53 year-old divorced mother of three with a Benedictine soul." She began to explore Benedictine life and discovered St. Gertrude's. She made First Monastic Profession in 2006 and dedicated herself through Final Monastic Profession in 2009.

She became the manager of the St. Gertrude's Book and Gift Shop, expanding the shop's offerings of handcrafted goods, books, and religious items. She sold handcrafted rosaries and established an online presence.



*Sister Miriam working in the Archives.*

In 2016 she began a new ministry as the Monastery's archivist. She embraced the role by taking online courses in archives and databases. She responded to research inquiries, created a digital database on each sister, and worked to eliminate duplicate documents as well as number and identify historical photos. Her most recent project was gathering materials to celebrate the upcoming 2020 centennial of the laying of the cornerstone of the St. Gertrude's chapel.

In addition, she taught herself how to knit and crochet, making crafts for Raspberry Festival, the Book and Gift Shop, and her grandchildren. She also created stained glass art, sang and played guitar, enjoyed photography and literature, and recently took an online drawing class.

She loved living Benedictine community life. "The wonderful thing about this life is living in community. The hardest thing about living in this life is community," she said. She kept a pair of rocks on her windowsill: a rough rock and a smooth rock that she made smooth by rubbing it against the rough rock. "There are going to be both the smooth rock and rough rock situations. That's where creativity and prayer come in. One flows to the other."

Sister Miriam is survived by her three children Alicia Mendez-Stevens, Olivia Mendez-Alm, and Robert Mendez; her sister Margaret Goldsmith; grandchildren Noah Alm, Samantha Alm, and Madeleine Stevens; and her Benedictine sisters. The Mass of Christian Burial was held on June 1. Memorial gifts can be made to the Monastery of St. Gertrude. ✕



*Sister Miriam with her children:  
Olivia (top), Robert, and Alicia.*



## National Weather Service Celebrates Sister Placida and the Monastery



*Bruce Beauck (far left) and Corby Dickerson (center) of the Missoula, Montana, headquarters of the National Weather Service with Prioress Sister Mary Forman (left) and Sister Placida Wemhoff (far right).*

At noon on Wednesday, May 8, two representatives from the Missoula, Montana, headquarters of the National Weather Service visited the Monastery of St. Gertrude to commend 80 years of weather reporting service.

Bruce Beauck, meteorologist in charge, and Corby Dickerson, meteorologist, presented the Monastery with a plaque honoring 80 years of being an active weather station. Sr. Placida Wemhoff was also honored for 40 years of monitoring and data recording.

"It's truly amazing to have a weather station endure, unchanged, for so long," said Dickerson.

Beauck added, "This is a rare weather site. Wherever you go people are talking about the climate and the only way to accurately measure weather is to have a station that doesn't change." He explained how the surroundings of weather stations are often developed and paved, which raises temperatures in the immediate area.

In contrast, St. Gertrude's hillside weather station and its surroundings has remained unchanged since John Jorgensen began it in 1939. In 1941, St. Gertrude's employee Sabi Frei took over and checked it daily until near the end of his life in 1980. Then the Monastery's director of Maintenance and Operations Sr. Bertha Vogel, along with

a team of other sisters that included Sr. Placida, kept up the monitoring.

In 1993, Sr. Placida became the main weather reporter as part of her responsibilities as the new director of Maintenance and Operations. "I check it every evening at 5:30 right after Evening Prayer so I don't forget," she said.

The weather station consists of a wooden box that has three thermometers that register the day's high, low, and present temperatures. There are also two rain gauges (daily and monthly) for recording precipitation and a ruler that measures snowfall to the tenth of an inch. Sr. Placida submits data to the Missoula headquarters each month and sends weekly reports to the Cottonwood Chronicle.

"It's just part of the job," said Sr. Placida. "It is interesting for me to compare the years and share the information with the sisters." In February 2019 she recorded 67.5 inches of snow, which is the most for February at the Monastery site for recorded history.

Beauck said that in his 33-year career he has never given a 40-year award to an individual for weather station reporting and has awarded a 75-plus institution weather station award only a handful of times.

"In looking at climate patterns across the United States and having reliable data this weather station is just invaluable. On a scale of one to ten, this is a ten. You just don't get weather stations like this — and Sr. Placida has done a fabulous job of maintaining this weather station." ✕



*The Monastery of St. Gertrude weather station is near the Stations of the Cross.*