



# CANTICLE OF ST. GERTRUDE

A JOURNAL OF  
OUR LIFE

Fall 2021

## A Message from the Prioress Melania the Elder, Wealthy Benefactress and Monastic Foundress

by Sister Mary Forman

From my days as a graduate student to my many years of teaching monastic studies, I have been deeply grateful to be introduced to some remarkable Christian women in the history of the church.

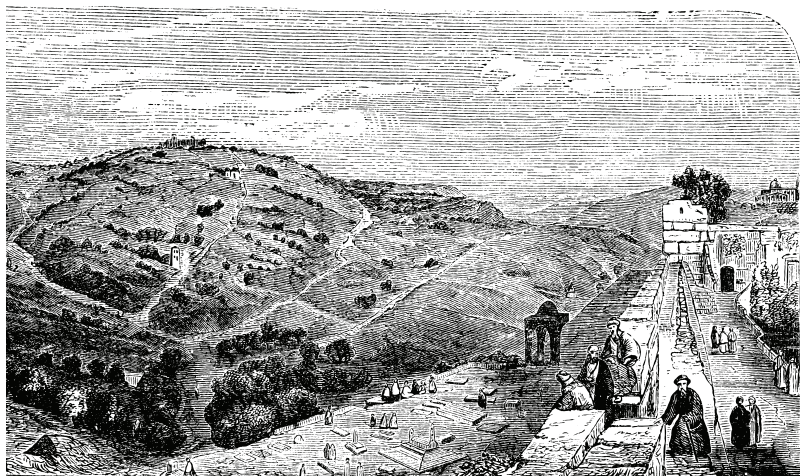
What struck me most in reading the *Life of St. Antony*, written by Archbishop Athanasius in the fourth century is that, although Antony is purported to be the “father of monasticism,” he was not the first monk. He went out to the edge of his village to learn virtues from those practicing asceticism and before setting out for the desert, he put his sister in a

convent (VA 3)<sup>1</sup>.

What is true for the history of monasticism, is also true for the history of women’s contributions to monasticism throughout most of history, that is, the men’s names and deeds have been commemorated and handed down, while the women’s contributions have but brief mention and at times they are nameless. With this issue of the *Canticle*, we begin a series of stories from the early church of famous women who significantly shaped the church, particularly through their support of individual monks and ascetical women and the building of churches and founding of monasteries.

One such woman was Melania the Elder, a contemporary of Monica, the mother of Augustine of Hippo, although neither woman met the other. However, Melania and Augustine

<sup>1</sup> See Tim Vivian, “Introduction,” in Athanasius of Alexandria, *The Life of Antony: The Coptic and the Greek Life*, Cistercian Studies 202, translated by Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2003) xxiv.



Vintage engraving of the Mount of Olives, as seen from Jerusalem

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### 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.



# sister story

## Sister Placida Wemhoff Wins An Award

On Monday, November 1st, Sister Placida will be awarded the Holm Award and the Dick Hagenmeyer Award. These awards are the result of her forty-five years of service to recording the weather at St. Gertrude's.

The Hagenmeyer Award is granted to weather observers after 45 years of service. The Holm Award is only given to twenty-five observers of the six or seven thousand observers that volunteer their data to the National Weather Service. The recipient of the award is chosen based in part on the following criteria:

- Consistently provides accurate and complete weather observations.
- Has taken and reported observations under hazardous or extreme weather conditions for an extended period of time.
- Has shown unusual effort to continuously provide observations despite illness, emergency absences, or equipment failure.
- Independently prepares or publishes climatological data or summaries based on quality, consistency and length of time issued.
- Demonstrates outstanding enthusiasm for imparting observational knowledge.

Sister Placida's commitment to work that sometimes requires long hours, unusual effort, remarkable

cooperation, and consistent accuracy goes

beyond weather data collection. She grew up in a farming family here on the Camas Prairie. Seeing her father spend much time in prayer while on his tractor was one of the places she learned the value of concentration and solitude.

In regard to another of her specialties, bookbinding and repair, she says, "I enjoy the solitude. Underneath the concentration of the craft is another element: I can go to God."

Her first 30 years at St. Gertrude's were spent teaching middle school, mainly teaching math. At first, she thought she was not cut out to be a teacher, but she committed to becoming good at it and her willingness to commit unusual effort to everything she does allowed her to have a fulfilling career.

After her retirement, she took over as Director of Maintenance and Operations on site at the Monastery of St. Gertrude.

She is also responsible for plant care, including the orchard. When she took it over in 1993, it was barely productive as the trees were quite old by then and had not been maintained. With the same determination that she undertakes everything else, Sister Placida set out to rejuvenate the orchard. If you have ever had the opportunity to eat breakfast with the Sisters, you may have had some of the canned pears that now are harvested yearly from the orchard. If you've tasted them, you know that the results of Sister Placida's commitment to her craft has been successful.



**"The key to happiness is  
living in the present moment  
— that present moment  
being filled with God."**



Left: Sister Placida sewing clothing for children. Right: In the garden. Below: Bookbinding.



## The World Needs Benedict Now More than Ever *by Sister Teresa Jackson*



How do we cope in this time when our world seems to be engulfed in multiple crises, prolonged suffering, and division? Many of us are feeling tired, frustrated, angry, depressed. We may despair that things are getting worse rather than better. But perhaps, in the midst of the chaos, we can find help in an unexpected place.

Over 1500 years ago Benedict of Norcia gathered a few followers on a mountaintop in Italy. Together they led a simple, structured way of life dedicated to deeply knowing God. To help his fellow seekers, he wrote a guidebook to the spiritual life which came to be called the Rule of St. Benedict.

Benedict's guidebook is a very short, simple, and practical resource for spiritual seekers. But it is also profound and timeless. Today we tend to think that his advice and wisdom is somehow limited to monks and nuns, but that is not true. Benedict's guidebook to the spiritual life is applicable to all people, in all places and all times. It is a guidebook for everyone who wants to know God more deeply.

In the chaos, suffering, and division that seem to be engulfing our world perhaps we can cling to one small piece of advice he gave. In a chapter entitled "Tools of Good Works" Benedict offers a long list of "tools" or practices and advice that we can use to grow in faith. While we could spend quite a few books and several lifetimes unpacking what Benedict says, his summation seems especially appropriate for our days. After a long list of practical advice, he concludes: "And, finally, never lose hope in God's mercy."

Try sitting with that statement for a minute (or for a few years!) Most of us probably find it pretty easy to lose hope in God's mercy these days, or at the very least we have trouble keeping God's mercy always before us. God's mercy is not something we are showing one another very often in our divisions and disagreements these days. God's mercy is often

not the first thing on our mind when we hear of yet another catastrophe in our suffering world. God's mercy is hard to cling to when we are tired, overwhelmed, and stressed beyond our limits.

But Benedict is saying, live in hope. Yes, things are hard, but remember, God is faithful. Yes, there is a lot to be upset about, but can we remember that God's mercy extends to everyone? Yes, we have been living in a state of crisis for too long and we're

at the end of our rope, but remember, God's mercy is what upholds the world. Never lose hope in God's mercy. Benedict lived in a time of disruption and chaos much worse than ours,

but he knew that always living in awareness of God's mercy will get us through.

Now more than ever, all of us need the wisdom of Benedict. He continues to speak to anyone and everyone who wants to know God more deeply and to change the world as a result. This is the Benedictine wisdom that we offer the world today. Join with us here at St. Gertrude's as all of us, together "never lose hope in God's mercy." ✕

**"And, finally, never lose  
hope in God's mercy."  
(RB 4:74)**





# *spirit center*

## Thanks For Nothing

by Tim Oberholzer

In the spirit of healing hospitality, grateful simplicity, and creative peacemaking, Spirit Center strives to ensure our guests have nothing to worry about.

No meals to cook  
No laundry to wash  
No prayers to memorize  
No politics to debate  
No snow to shovel  
No people to please  
No toilets to clean  
No goals to achieve  
No wounds to hide  
No theology to affirm  
No television to watch  
No obligation to socialize  
No bed to make  
No dog to walk  
No speeches to give  
No emotions to deny  
No beliefs to accept  
No lawn to mow  
No grades to earn  
No boss to please  
No litter box to clean  
No meetings to Zoom

Thank you to Sr. Lillian, Marilyn, Kay, Sr. Carlotta, Peggy, Sherry, Shania, Jeannette, Fred, Sabrina, Dawn, Robyn, Teri, Calvin, and Craig. Thank you to all the employees, volunteers, oblates, donors, and friends of the Monastery of St. Gertrude who support Spirit Center in a myriad of ways. And, of course, thank you to Sr. Mary and all the sisters of the Monastery of St. Gertrude who support this ministry with prayers, wisdom, hospitality, and love. ✕

Thanks for nothing,  
it means everything!



**Tim Oberholzer** oversees Spirit Center and is a novice spiritual director. Tim spent five and a half years as a monk at New Melleray Abbey in Peosta, Iowa, before discerning out of monastic life and moving to Idaho to be closer to his parents. He earned a business degree from the University of Notre Dame, studied philosophy and theology at the University of St. Thomas, and currently participates in the Stewards of the Mystery spiritual direction training program. Tim is a remarried widower, an ultramarathon runner, and an avid reader.



## Hosting Your Group

Spirit Center is a 21,800 square foot, state-of-the-art retreat facility located on grounds of the beautifully secluded, historic Monastery of St. Gertrude. Constructed using multiple sustainable building techniques, Spirit Center was carefully engineered to leave as small an ecological footprint as possible.

Spirit Center was designed for flexibility and is able to accommodate your large or small group in an intimate and comfortable atmosphere. We also have the Farm House, a separate house for groups.

A galley kitchen is available and visitors are invited to the Monastery dining room for delicious home-cooked meals. Other amenities include a guest library, art studio, prayer chapel, outgoing mail service, and laundry room.

Spirit Center provides plenty of opportunities to enjoy the outdoors. Guests are invited to explore the trails of the Monastery forest. The Clearwater, Snake, and Salmon rivers are just minutes away.

To discuss possibilities for your group retreat and learn about our Covid-19 safety protocols, call 208-962-2070 or fill out an online Group Inquiry Form at [stgertrudes.org/spirit-center-hosting-your-group](http://stgertrudes.org/spirit-center-hosting-your-group). ☒



## We Are Hiring!

Be a part of sharing Benedictine hospitality with the world! We have positions open. Read the full job descriptions and application instructions at [stgertrudes.org](http://stgertrudes.org).

☒



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[www.StGertrudesGifts.org](http://www.StGertrudesGifts.org)

## Spirit Center upcoming events

More information at [www.spirit-center.org](http://www.spirit-center.org)

Nov 29 - Dec 17	Silence the Christmas Noise (flexible dates)
Jan 7-9	Discover Your Soul Potential
Jan 28 - Feb 4	Come To The Quiet
Feb 21-25	The Sacred Art of Traditional Iconography
Mar 4-6	Lenten Yoga Journey
Mar 8-10	A Watercolor Journey



had met in Hippo when she left Rome for Jerusalem around 404.

Melania was a significant figure in fourth-century Christian ascetical circles. As an aristocratic widow of wealth, she spent many years in Rome, where she moved in the same circles as Marcella and Paula, friends of Jerome. After leaving her only son Publicola with the Prefect of the City to oversee his education, she went on pilgrimage to visit the famous desert monks of Egypt and Palestine. It is highly probable that Melania met Rufinus of Aquileia in Alexandria. The two established a double monastery in Jerusalem at the Mount of Olives. This set of communities welcomed many of the famous personages of the fourth-century ascetical movement. In particular, Evagrius of Pontus, who was ordained a lector by Basil, visited Melania. Basil's best friend Gregory of Nazianzen, ordained Evagrius a deacon. Palladius, the traveler and chronicler of famous men and women in his *Historia lausiaca* also visited at her monastic settlement. Melania and Rufinus offered hospitality to Paula and Jerome, whom they encouraged in their establishment of a double monastery in Bethlehem.<sup>2</sup>



At the age of sixty, around the year 399, Melania returned to Italy, partaking of the hospitality of her distant relative, Paulinus of Nola, near Naples. She persuaded her son Publicola and his wife Albina to embrace the ascetical life; later, their daughter, Melania the Younger, and her husband Pinian would also take up pursuit of asceticism and use their vast wealth for charitable works.

Melania is considered an *amma*, that is, a "spiritual mother," which derives from the semitic *Em(ma)*, as related to the Coptic *mau*. The title *amma* bestows reverent respect on a wise woman, who was recognized as a spiritual guide for another, irrespective of her role as leader of a community or not.<sup>3</sup> *Ammas* were recognized as *pneumataphores* or bearers of the spirit of God. These women through their spiritual direction, exemplary virtuous lives, and generous bestowal of wealth, either of finances or experience

in the ascetical life, served as midwives at Christ's birth in others, or called forth reciprocal benefits in those to whom they ministered.<sup>4</sup>

The account most illustrative of Melania's intuitive skills as an *amma* was the story of Evagrius as recorded in Palladius' *Historia lausiaca*.<sup>5</sup> With spiritual insight, Melania wisely uncovered the source for Evagrius' lingering illness, which wasted away his body. Evagrius had gone back on an earlier promise to become a monk. Melania extracted a promise from him to take up the monastic life and through the intercession of her prayers, his health was restored. Melania's care for Evagrius manifested the practice of *custos animi*, wherein one member of a relationship becomes responsible "for another's well-being and ultimate salvation"<sup>6</sup>, having knowledge of the other's inner life and its spiritual dimension. Were it not for Melania's spiritual insight and consequent conversation with Evagrius, the monastic world would likely not have had one of the most gifted writers on the spiritual life; yet it is the spiritual "son" of her discernment that is remembered in the history of the church, when his spiritual "mother" is hardly remembered.

Melania's feast day is June 8. The church and especially the history of monasticism owes a debt of gratitude to Melania for her gift of discernment, born out of years of prayer and the practice of Christian asceticism, which included reading the Bible, fasting, and attentiveness to the Spirit's guidance in her life and the lives of those with whom she engaged in spiritual companioning. While she recognized that she herself was a sinner, she believed God would hear her prayers on behalf of others. Thank you, Melania, for your fidelity to God, to prayer, to the Spirit guiding your conversations with others which drew them to Christ, the source of your wisdom and holiness. ✠

4 See Mary Forman, "Desert Ammas: Midwives of Wisdom," *Nova Doctrina Vetusque: Essays on Early Christianity in Honor of Fredric W. Schlatter, S.J.*, American University Studies, Series VII Theology and Religion 207, edited by Douglas Kries and Catherine Brown Tkacz (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), especially pp. 187 and 193-196.

5 "Evagrius," *Palladius: The Lausiaca History*, *Ancient Christian Writers* 34, translated by Robert T. Meyer (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1964) 119-114, especially section 8-9, pp. 112-113 on Melania and Evagrius.

6 Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience 350-1250*, *Cistercian Studies* 95 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988) xvi.

2 For details of the reconstruction of historical events surrounding Melania's activities, see Francis X. Murphy, "Melania the Elder: A Biographical Note," *Traditio* 5 (1947) 59-77.

3 Irénée Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, *Cistercian Studies* 116, translated by Anthony P. Gythiel (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990) 277.



# from the development office

## ARIGATO!

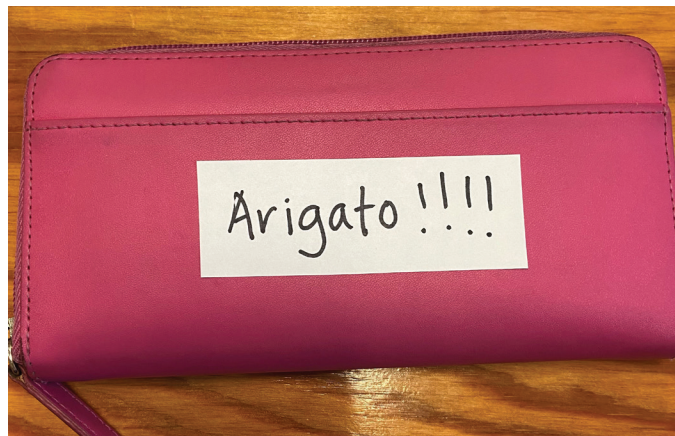
by Carrie Barton

Here's something I've learned. Consciously practicing gratitude brings a sense of abundance.

I have a sticker on my wallet that says, "Arigato!!!!" A grocery store clerk recently asked me "what's up with that?" What's up is that "arigato" is a Japanese word for "thank you" and the sticker reminds me to be grateful for what I have every time I see or handle my wallet. It's one simple way to build consciousness of all that Creation offers me in every moment.

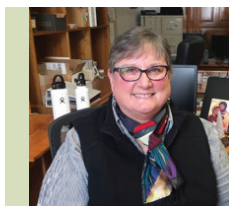
In the almost three years that I've been a member of this St. Gertrude's community, the Rule of St. Benedict and the Monastery's vision have changed the way I think about the big things. One of those big things is my view of my personal needs versus what I think I want. I may want a lot of things, but do I need a lot of things? I haven't always enjoyed the process of asking myself that question but, as we used to say in 4-H when faced with a problematic task, it's been a challenge and an opportunity!

In the end, I'm grateful for learning to practice the experience of abundance in sufficiency – and living the values of simplicity, peacemaking, and hospitality. And when I slip, which is often, consciously practicing gratitude nudges me in the right direction.



As partners in our ministries, you express your gratitude for the values of simplicity, peacemaking, and hospitality as practiced by the St. Gertrude's community. Your generosity confirms your understanding of my premise – you give abundantly of your time, talent, treasure, and trust. The Stewardship Report you'll find enclosed in this Canticle demonstrates the depth and breadth of the company you keep.

We pray for you every day and embrace you as allies in everything we do. Your gifts provide critical financial and other resources we need, that goes without saying. Your gifts also inspire us to create and explore new ways to engage others in this abundant Benedictine life. Thank you! ✕



**Carrie Barton** is the donor relations officer for the Development Team at the Monastery. She is a transplant from the Boise valley where she was born and lived all but three years of her life. In her role at St. Gertrude's she sees her ultimate purpose is to invite you to partner with God to transform the lives of others through the Monastery's mission and ministries.





# Back Page

## Thanksgiving A Poem by Kate Seymour MacLean

The Autumn hills are golden at the top,  
And rounded as a poet's silver rhyme;  
The mellow days are ruby ripe, that drop  
One after one into the lap of time.

Dead leaves are reddening in the woodland copse,  
And forest boughs a fading glory wear;  
No breath of wind stirs in their hazy tops,  
Silence and peace are brooding everywhere.

The long day of the year is almost done,  
And nature in the sunset musing stands,  
Gray-robed, and violet-hooded like a nun,  
Looking abroad o'er yellow harvest lands:

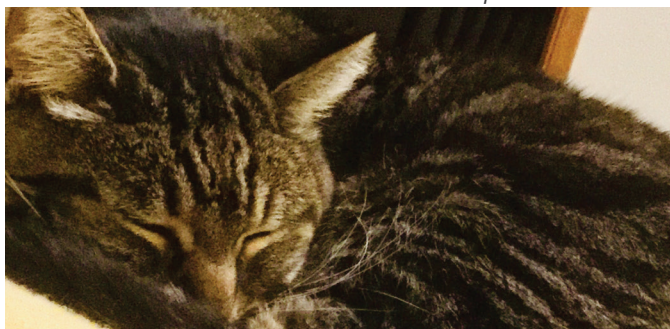
O'er tents of orchard boughs, and purple vines  
With scarlet flecked, flung like broad banners out  
Along the field paths where slow-pacing lines  
Of meek-eyed kine obey the herdboys' shout;

Where the tired ploughman his dun oxen turns,  
Unyoked, afield, mid dewy grass to stray,  
While over all the village church spire burns--  
A shaft of flame in the last beams of day.

Empty and folded are her busy hands;  
Her corn and wine and oil are safely stored,  
As in the twilight of the year she stands,  
And with her gladness seems to thank the Lord.

Thus let us rest awhile from toil and care,  
In the sweet sabbath of this autumn calm,  
And lift our hearts to heaven in grateful prayer,  
And sing with nature our thanksgiving psalm.

*Kate Seymour MacLean was a Canadian poet from the late 1800s. She attended school at the Falley Seminary in New York before her move to Canada where she spent the rest of her life. Her work is now in the public domain.*



## Celebration



*Pictured, left to right: Carla Rowe-Malcolm, Sister Mary Forman, Kathryn Fader*

Sister Mary Forman, OSB, Prioress, spent the weekend of September 10-12, 2021 at the College of Pharmacy, Idaho State University, celebrating her 50th class reunion. She graduated in 1970 and the celebration had initially been scheduled for last year, but was delayed a year because of Covid.

The celebration was also the 100th Anniversary of the college itself. The pharmacy school had raised \$15 million in their Capital Campaign for student scholarships, research, and upgrades to the Leonard Building and celebrated with a Centennial patio with names of significant donors in the front of the building.

Carla Rowe-Malcolm, Kathryn Fader, and Sr. Mary all graduated together in 1970, and they enjoyed lectures from renowned pharmacists, the dedication of the patio, a Gala Dinner with music, and a picnic.

Many wonderful and memorable memories were shared with each other and one other student from their class. A highlight was looking over photos of the graduating class of 1970. Sister Mary says, "Oh my, the changes we have undergone! Mostly in hair color!"

