



Newsletter 32

*To the Superiors,
to the OCSO Regional Secretaries
and to the brothers and sisters
interested in formation.*

ISLES

Sr. Sarah (Glencairn)

Prompted by the Covid restrictions of the past two years, we monks and nuns of the Region of the Isles, like other regions, have begun to explore the potential of online video conferencing to gather virtually for our formation meetings. As our annual “in-person” junior course has been postponed for two years in succession, instead we have held a series of formation conferences which were open to all monks and nuns to facilitate both initial and ongoing formation.

Course on Monastic Vows *November, 2021*



On *24th and 25th November, 2021*, Sr. Benedict Thiessen OCSO, from Arnhem, The Netherlands, gave six conferences over the course of two days entitled: ***“Who is The One who Desires life and Longs to See Good days? The Vow of Conversatio Morum Suorum”***.

These conferences explored how the vow of *conversatio morum suorum* can lead us towards transformation in Christ. By looking at our tradition, monastic texts, the modern experiential approach and reading in our own experience –more contemplating than reflecting– the course offered helpful signposts on our monastic pilgrimage towards our identity in Christ.

Course on Scripture *7th – 11th February, 2022*

Sr. Anne Elizabeth Sweet OCSO from Tautra Mariakloster, Norway, gave the second of our formation courses entitled: ***“First Corinthians: Words of Wisdom for our Monastic Communities Today”***. The major concern of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians is the community life of this early Christian Church.

The Corinthians were richly blessed with many gifts, yet at the same time, they were a community torn apart by factions and divisions. Paul's wisdom regarding the challenges that faced them is timeless and universal, and both Benedict and our own Cistercian constitutions draw upon this letter. Examining Paul's text, with the life of our own Cistercian communities in focus, Sr. Anne Elizabeth brought both her academic qualifications in the field of Scripture as well as the benefit of her monastic experience to produce insights from Paul's wisdom that spoke to our own experience as Cistercians building community together in Christ.



Course on Early Monastic Spirituality

16th – 20th May, 2022



Presented by **Fr. Daniel Hombergen OCSO** from Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey, Oregon, USA entitled: ***“Emotional Disorder, Prayer and Healing in the Early Monastic Tradition”***.

Departing from the deeply rooted emotional disturbances called ‘Passions’ and ‘Evil Thoughts’, the early monks strived for healing through the ascetic struggle in order to ‘attain purity of heart and a continual mindfulness of God’ (cf. Constitution 3:2). This practice finally developed into the Hesychast tradition, especially in the Eastern tradition, however the course focused on its early stage (4th to 7th centuries), with authors such as Evagrius, Cassian, the Apophthegmata, Diadochus, Dorotheus of Gaza, John Climacus and others. Fr. Daniel's qualifications in Patrology and early monasticism and his experience teaching these subjects for several years in Sant'Anselmo in Rome lent authority and breadth of knowledge to both his presentations and subsequent discussion in the group.

In addition to the learning and sharing of wisdom in these gatherings, we also enjoyed the opportunity to connect again, even if only online, with our Cistercian and Bernardine brothers and sisters in a spirit of prayer, learning and fraternal joy.

Junior Seminar

2nd – 8th October, 2022

Our final formation course planned for this year in the Region of the Isles is a week-long seminar for our monks and nuns in initial formation due to take place in ***Mellifont Abbey, Ireland***, from ***2nd to 8th October, 2022***. The seminar is entitled: ***“Listening with the Ear of an Earth-Caring Heart: Reading the Gospel of St. John in the Context of the Ecological Crisis”***. The presenter is **Dr. Margaret Daly Denton**.

Formerly a nun of Glencairn, Margaret is an internationally published church composer and biblical scholar. She has taught bible and liturgy at various institutions in Ireland and has recently retired from teaching New Testament at Trinity College Dublin. Margaret has published several books



including: *David in the Fourth Gospel: The Johannine Reception of the Psalms* (Brill Academic Pub, 1999) *Psalm-Shaped Prayerfulness: A Guide to the Christian Reception of the Psalms* (Columba Press, 2010) and most recently published *John: An Earth Bible Commentary: Supposing Him to Be the Gardener* (Bloomsbury, 2019).

Course description:

During this week, we will work together on reading the Scriptures from an earth conscious perspective, intentionally making the ecological crisis a context in which to listen to them. In the first few sessions, we will learn from scholars who have been developing various approaches to the emerging discipline of ecological hermeneutics. We will then focus in detail on doing an attentive, eco-hermeneutical reading of the Fourth Gospel.

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Sr. Pamela (Wrentham)

Junior Seminar

April 25 – May 7, 2022

It was with great joy that the Region's juniors gathered for the first in person Junior Seminar since 2019. The community of *Holy Cross Abbey (Berryville)* were welcoming and generous in offering Cistercian hospitality to the 16 juniors and **Fr. Michael Casey OCSO**, the presenter. Fr. Michael shaped his 18 presentations for the most part around his recent book, *"Cœnobium: Reflections on Monastic Community"*. The questions Fr. Michael provided were discussed by small groups some afternoons. Integration of the content of his talks with the juniors' lived experience was the purpose of these discussion sessions.



Holy Cross Abbey is located in the Shenandoah Valley on property that featured in the early history of the United States. Artifacts can sometimes still be found around the property. When not in sessions or discussions, many juniors hiked and otherwise enjoyed the natural beauty of the site. A day trip south (six hours round trip!) to Our Lady of the Angels Monastery (Crozet) afforded a very short introduction to the sisters' community.

We are grateful for the thoughtful presentations Fr. Michael gave and for the shared time with the Berryville brothers.

2022 Formators meeting

At the school of two masters of human truth: Anthony the Great and Saint Benedict

In *Vitorchiano*, from 4 to 9 July 2022, our usual Course for formators took place after two years of absence due to covid-19. This year they were able to participate in the meeting: F. Giovanni (Boschi), Sr. Maria (Cortona), F. Loris (Frattocchie), Sr. Maddalena (Offida), Mth. Magdalene (San Gimignano), Br. Matteo (Tre Fontane), Mth. Martha (Acque Salvie / Tre Fontane), Sr. Fatima and Sr. Valeria (Valserena), Sr. Alba and Sr. M. Giovanna (Vitorchiano). Some, to our regret and theirs, were unable to participate due to community commitments.



The two lecturers of these days, **Don Francesco La Rocca, osb**, of San Martino delle Scale and **Mother Monica Della Volpe** of Valserena, dealt with the theme: *“From ancient monasticism, two masters of human truth: Anthony’s life – Benedict’s life”*, placing ourselves at the school of these two great fathers of ancient monasticism. In the writings of the respective lives of Anthony the Great, transmitted to us by St. Athanasius, and of St. Benedict, told to us by St. Gregory the Great, the two speakers focused on anthropological teaching

according to some themes identified in both crucial: evil, sin, temptation, struggle, choice, human truth, maturity, fatherhood.

With **Don Francesco la Rocca** we retraced Anthony’s life by identifying the various passages, called “the [several] Easter”, in which it unfolds. The choice of a coherent Christian life, divine sonship understood as obedience to the Word, the search for teachers through whom to grow in virtue, the purpose of monastic life with its inevitable temptations and battles. Until you learn the art of solitude, that is, that dimension of the inner desert with which you learn to be with yourself and before God, as a premise for the transmission of an experiential experience crossed and reworked in the first person that becomes paternity. The maturity witnessed by Anthony is precisely obedience to the Word which becomes charity in his teaching, in the accompaniment of the brothers and in being for them a constant reference to Christ.

In the *dialogue* that followed, the issues we discussed together were many: The primacy of experience in our task of transmission. The need for an ecclesial environment in which the personal encounter with God becomes communion. The difficulty found in the aperture and the obedience to a Word that is received. The aversion to fatigue, not always recognized as a channel through which grace passes. The distortion of reality and the mental confusion caused by evil. The freedom of the formator and the unity of the community around a recognized fatherhood, as conditions for seeking together a truth.

Mother **Monica Della Volpe** instead presented us the life of Saint Benedict by San Gregorio. In the lives of both saints the fundamental themes have reappeared, albeit in

their specificity. Even in Benedict's life itinerary those stages have been identified, marked by some precise choices, which led him to become from PUER to VIR: first, son and then, father. Benedict flees from the temptation of the corruption of the vices proposed to him by the false wisdom of Rome, from the temptation of a very comfortable and rewarding Christian life, in search of true Wisdom, that is, of true humanism. Path that will lead Benedict to the Speco and here to the fight against the devil, after which he becomes a teacher, until Vicovaro's resounding failure that will make him capable of living in his interiority by opening him to contemplation, that is, making him mature in considering the things of God. Maturity in Benedict becomes fatherhood which is correction, teaching by example, blessing that confers the grace of obedience, the ability to detach from his own works.

Two aspects have been extrapolated from all this: the formative approach based on truth and the need for a journey of maturity of personal identity, which has been given concrete application starting from the context of the dominant culture. The rise of current ideologies, atheistic materialism, idolatrous self-worship, the need for conformism have weakened the identity. In the face of the great goals of truth we have reached in the twentieth century (Trinitarian, anthropological theology, teaching on human love, on the conception of the body, on the dignity of life and of the family), the ideologies of evil wanted to insinuate their instinct to death dripping with the desire to seek one's own pleasure at the expense of the truth of one's identity (elimination of sin, God, fatherhood, openness to abortion, gender, etc.). It emerged that our role as formators is precisely to help each person recognize their own identity and their own truth as the image of God.

In the *dialogue* that followed, the themes of discernment were addressed as a continuous exercise of truth about one's life in collaboration with grace. The search for the true good of the person. The task of fidelity in preserving and transmitting what we have received. Lack of identity consistency in us and in the people we accompany that can be declined in the need for external signs of identity, security, continuous consensus, in the fear of making mistakes that paralyzes, in an attempt to avoid any conflict, even if constructive, etc.

To complete the contribution of the two main speakers, *contributions*, always of an *anthropological-experiential nature*, were presented by some participants, followed by *exchanges and dialogues*. Two contributions have tried to deepen the themes dealt with in texts by modern authors. **Sr. Alba** di Vitorchiano presented us with some *letters of Berlicche* by Lewis, highlighting certain suggestions that the devil makes to distract man of all time from a healthy Christian life. While **sr. M. Giovanna** (Vitorchiano) shared a Christian reinterpretation of some episodes chosen from Tolkien's saga, *Lord of the Rings*. A third contribution, reported by **Mth. Maddalena** from San Gimignano, developed these same themes starting from *the experience of Divo Barsotti*, underlining how some aspects, found in the lives of Anthony and Benedict, also reappear in the life of this passionate seeker of God. Finally, the fourth contribution of **sr. Fatima and sr. Valeria** from Valserena presented the result of a *research work*, carried out among people in formation, with respect to the understanding and direct experience that they have of sin, temptation, struggle and choice. In fact, a fifth work has also been received, not related to the group, by **sr. Ilaria** di Ghiffa entitled "*maturity as an open process*".



After the first four days of work we had the joy of having with us the Abbot General, **Dom Bernardus Peeters**, accompanied by his secretary, F. Raphaël Garcia-Pelayo. We shared with him the birth and development of the meeting of formators, from its beginning –1982– to today, and all the issues dealt with in the various years, then making him aware of the work done in those days. After listening to us, he gave us a conference on the confrontation with evil in the formative process entitled: ***“Taking risks and taking each other by the hand”***

in which he led us to the need to discover our true identity in God as the only possibility to fight against evil, and reach, with others, the goal of the journey of monastic life. This not easy process of formation (initial as permanent) requires us to abandon our false self, reassuring but illusory, to discover the truth of our being made in the image of God-Love and learn to put it into being in our life of relationship and gift, through a work of profound conversion. Afterwards, the dialogue on the contents of his speech took place and we asked questions about his first impression of the Order from the regions he had already visited.

On the last day, before leaving for our respective homes, we drew up the program for next year’s meeting and took our leave, grateful for the possibility of in-depth study, exchange of experiences and an opportunity for friendship that those days represented, waiting to meet again next year to make another small stretch of the journey together.

See the attached ***conferenzerelatori.pdf*** and ***contributi partecipanti.pdf*** (in Italian).

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Dom Bernardus Peeters p. 17

Sr. Maria Giovanna p. 1
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Sr. Fatima and sr. Valeria p. 9
Sr. Ilaria p. 17

CNSG

Sr. Ana Laura (Hinojo)

Academic Session about St. Gertrude’s writings

On **July 7th 2022**, in the context of the International Medieval Congress of the University of Leeds, U.K., the International Committee for Nomination of St. Gertrude as a Doctor of the Church (CNSG) held a session titled: ***«Steps on the Understanding of Legatus Divinæ Pietatis: The Leipzig Manuscript 827»***. The meeting aimed to introduce the main features of the forthcoming edition of the Leipzig Manuscript 827, the critical issues raised by the text, and some possible hermeneutic ways to solve them, with the larger goal of spreading and fostering the progress of studies relating to the codex.

Indeed, in 2018 the International Committee for Nomination of Saint Gertrude as a Doctor of the Church committed itself to publishing Leipzig Manuscript and to translating it into several modern languages. The task was entrusted to an international team, some of whose members made up of this session. Today the critical bilingual edition, Latin-French, is about to be released on Sources Chr tiennes series, editions Du Cerf.

These academic sessions are not directly addressed to monastic formation, but rather, to move the path of the Postulation of St Gertrude as a Doctor of the Church forward. However, the formation of specialists in areas concerning monastic tradition, is included into the OCSO Statute of Formation, numbers 55-59, as a way of fostering the formation of formators, even experts, in view to the initial and ongoing formation inside the Order. Within this spirit, next year, a new academic session titled: *«New Approaches to Legatus Divin  Pietatis from Leipzig University Library MS 827»* will be held in the 2023 International Congress on Medieval Studies of *Michigan University, Kalamazoo (MI)*.

Additional information in the Leeds ENG attachment (one page).

