

# BENEDICTINE VOICE

*Benedictine Sisters of Boerne, Texas*

Summer 2020

## Being Benedictine



## ...In a Broken World





## Being Benedictine in a Broken World

*"I have witnessed with great concern the disturbing social unrest in your nation in these past days, following the tragic death of Mr. George Floyd. We cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life."*

Pope Francis

To be a Benedictine in any century and in any crisis is to be a person who listens deeply to her heart and to what is happening around her. St. Benedict makes this very clear with the first words of the Prologue to the Rule. "Listen, my daughter with the ear of your heart". We listen for God's voice and we respond in prayer and ministry. We are to take what we hear and integrate it into our community and in our world. God's Word is to be translated into action in our World. It is no coincidence as I write this article that the first reading of today comes from Kings 19:9a-11-16 where Elijah through storms, earthquakes and fires hears God's voice in the tiny whispering sound and is given strength and courage to continue his mission.

As I listened for that same tiny whispering sound in the midst of the pandemic we are experiencing and the pain of racism, I was drawn to John 11:35. "And Jesus wept." Jesus has just met up with Mary, a grieving friend who in her pain looks up at Jesus and says, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." I'm sure those same words could be heard from George Floyd's family. Jesus' heart is moved by Mary's tears. Her grief and her pain are palpable, and his response is to enter her pain and hold it for her and in solidarity with her, weeps.

I weep today. Many of us weep today and I have no doubt that Jesus weeps with us as we experience our broken and hurting world. Jesus weeps for George Floyd, for Ahmaud Arbery, for Breonna Taylor and so many more like them.

Benedict goes on in the Rule in Chapter 4.14 instructing his followers to pay special attention to the needs of the poor and to those who are troubled and to console them in their sorrowing. The cry of the poor is palpable. It is a difficult time on so many levels. George Floyd's death has become the "cry of the poor, the cry of those discriminated against, the cry of the immigrants, the cry of unjust systems" heard around the world. There is no escaping this cry. Justice must prevail. Enough is enough. We must stand in solidarity with all our brothers and sisters and make change happen.

To say there is social unrest in the streets today is an understatement. It is said to be a moment of an "awakened moral consciousness". The people are demanding relief from suffering at the hands of a deadly system that perpetuates injustice and inequality due to the color of one's skin. May we heed the cry of the poor in the streets of our nation today. God, give us the grace we need to not "straddle the issue" but to choose you and act with courage to bring about Your peaceable Reign. May the Spirit set our hearts on fire for justice and equality for all. - Anna Chavez

As Benedictines, we too, cry out for justice. We continue to be restless because we are traveling through a desert time where we remain isolated in our monasteries trying to protect our elderly from the virus. We are praying now with much more intensity for the growing upheaval in our world.

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WE are following the CDC guidelines and encouraging others to do the same and trying to witness social responsibility in helping others. We are reaching out to the elderly, especially those in nursing homes who are experiencing the reality of isolation, of not seeing their loved ones. We are making sure that in as much as we can, we donate to the causes that will help those suffering to have enough food and shelter during this time. We are not forgetting the immigrants who are defenseless against the virus and our government. We continue to honor our gift of Benedictine Hospitality in new and creative ways.

We listen intently to other voices around us to help us focus our energy. Fr. Bryan Massingale reminds us that Catholics and other believers have a unique role to play in the fight for justice, through prayer. He called white supremacy and systemic racism 'a spiritual disorder'. "This reflects a spiritual wound, and until we have the ability to engage in deep forms of prayer, not just saying prayers but deep forms of prayer... asking the Holy Spirit to come into our lives and to change our hearts and to make us willing to see what we'd rather not see, until we're willing to do that, we're going to be caught in these perpetual cycles," he said. Our prayer these days is much more direct and much more pointed toward the injustice we are facing.

Through sharpening our listening, through ritual and prayer, and through focused conversations on racism, we walk in solidarity with those who are affected and we weep with them.

There is a wonderful song entitled "My World Needs You" by Kirk Franklin that was sung at George Floyd's funeral that has stayed with me. I urge you to listen to it.

*"Storms may come  
but when we call your name  
All things change!"*

*The anchor that holds me in my pain stays  
the same,*

*Oh, how sweet to know that your great  
name will never change!"*

All of us, if we listen, can hear that tiny whispering sound moving us toward making change possible. And change is happening. Large protests around the world holding us accountable for the sin of racism and shouting for justice.

*"All of us are made in God's  
image and likeness and all of us  
deserve respect and dignity as a  
human being."*

The bringing down of statues that hold memories of darkness and allowing the light to come through, the call to hold our police departments more accountable, people of all colors and races shouting in unison that Black Lives Matter! All of us matter in God's eyes. All of us are made in God's image and likeness and all of us deserve respect and dignity as a human being. We must admit that at this moment in history, the African American is not always treated with dignity and the seeds of racism that were sown so long ago are alive and continue to grow and must be stopped. The immigrants are not treated with dignity either.

We have a long way to go, but with God as our anchor, God as our hope and our strength, all things are possible! Join us in praying for healing. Join us in praying for peace.

*Sister Frances Briseño, OSA*





# OUR WORK IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

## Immigration by Sister Susan Mika, OSB, Director - Benedictine Coalition for Responsible Investment

In this time of pandemic, what changed? Everything changed about *how* we work, but the work itself did not change. As we left our office and worked remotely, our meetings went into being ZOOM encounters, our interactions went to email and telephone. The immigration changes, court cases, decrees, executive orders have been on-going - with or without the pandemic. With the focus of the world on COVID-19, the implications of immigration actions don't always rise to the front pages of the newspaper coverage.



The U.S. borders with Mexico and Canada closed to much of the regular travel. This has been the case for months. Usually, these ports of entry are bustling day and night with people and families coming/going and products being transported. The population in the family detention centers in Dilley, Texas and Karnes City, Texas remains very low, compared to the capacity - 2,400 and 1,000 respectively. The companies which run the facilities, The GEO Group and CoreCivic, continue to be paid through their contracts with the federal government.

Immigration continues to be impacted as federal courts continue to make rulings on areas affecting families being held in detention and those seeking asylum. The mission of the Interfaith Welcome Coalition (IWC) shifted from hands-on backpack ministry at the airport and bus station in San Antonio to other means of intervention. Huge numbers of immigrants are not being released and coming to San Antonio, as in the past, so they could travel and then be with their sponsors who might live in other parts of the United States. IWC funds and backpacks are being used to aid immigrants detained on the Mexican side of border where it can be dangerous with few amenities available.

We focus our energies on advocating for changes at the national legislative level. Immigration is regulated on the federal level, so our Senators and Representatives are key.

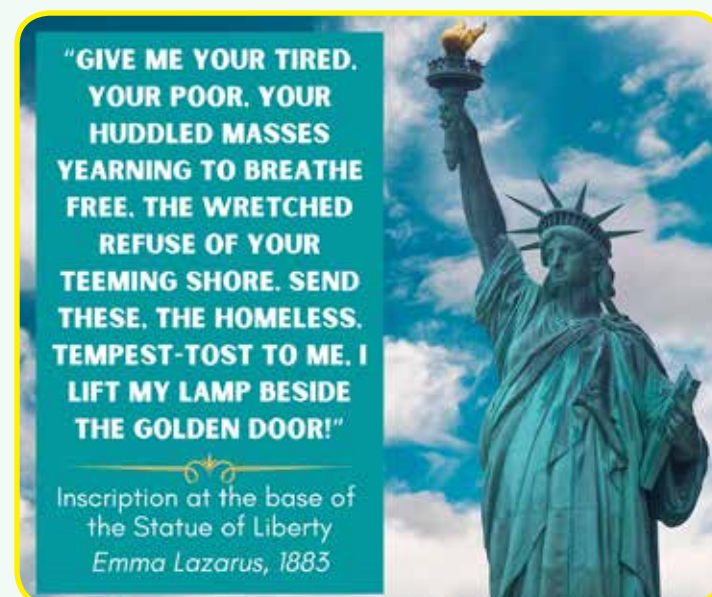
Our voices are raised to educate about the conditions and what solutions are needed. Congress is the entity that needs to pass laws to establish an immigration system that works in the 21st century.

Over the past months, it has been difficult to see images/hear reports:

- of children in cages,
- of families separated,
- of children detained for more than the mandated 20 days,
- of the lack of COVID-19 testing for those detained in close quarters,
- of full deportation flights to Central American countries,
- of how the Supreme Court would rule on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and what the uncertain consequences might be, and
- of the asylum system being decimated - one decision at a time.

Many decisions enacted by our government about family detention/immigration are being challenged in the federal courts. These cases take time to go through the processes. We have been dealing with the uncertainty - ups and downs - of our immigration policy for years. The permanent fix has to come from Congress!

We continue to document what is happening. In a time of much unsettling news, we remain steadfast in trying to expose the facts and speak truth to power. We are all immigrants unless we are from the native American tribes - our ancestors came from other lands and started a new life. Have we forgotten this fact?



## Caridad de Corazón by Sister Ursula Herrera, OSB, Director - Caridad de Corazón

These are certainly challenging times. Folks are getting sick, others are losing their jobs, and still others are lost in despair. Our mission is to assist the needy, for scripture reminds us, "what you did to the least of these you did it to me" (Matt 25:40). So, we don our masks and gloves and go about our usual day making up grocery bags, exchanging money for scholarships, and getting together the needs of the orphanages and soup kitchens in Piedras Negras.

So off we go with our grocery bags. In Eagle Pass, folks meet us at the gate with their masks, hiding their smiles of joy. We say, "May God bless you and keep you safe." They respond, "Thank you and God bless you." You get the sense of something missing as they hesitate at the gate before walking away. We wave and drive away.

The next day, off I go to Piedras Negras. No one is allowed into the orphanages. I ring the bell and place the requested items at the door. Someone opens the door and graciously carries in the supplies. Again, the mask hides their smile but it is evident in their eyes.

Scholarships are left with the Colonia overseer. Students remain optimistic as they continue their studies online. They work hard to keep their grade point average high because they do not want to lose their scholarship funds.

At the soup kitchen, I follow the same routine but this time they come to the van and help unload the items. Everyone greets me with great enthusiasm but when it comes to the

usual "abrazo", they stop in midair, only air hugs are permitted. Their eyes betray their hearts. The human touch is so much needed in this time of isolation but cannot be given or received.

Many of the folks requesting assistance at the soup kitchen have lost their jobs. In Mexico, there is little to no government assistance. Folks are not permitted to continue with their food carts, so their livelihood is severed. Restaurants are closed; waiters sit at home wondering when all this will end so they can resume their jobs. Even some factory workers have lost their jobs. Children and older folks, who subsisted on tips when bagging groceries, are no longer permitted to work. All of these lost opportunities at making a living have greatly impacted a large number of families.

Migrant and missionary use of the house dwindles as COVID-19 marches onward. In the past 3 months we've had only 3 migrant women and their children with us. Three small groups of missionaries have ventured forth. These small numbers of guests help us with social distancing.

We are very grateful to our benefactors who provide us with groceries or funds to purchase the supplies needed. Now we need to pray and work harder at keeping COVID-19 in check.

As numbers of cases rise in our country, there are rumors of the international bridge closing. Several of our beneficiaries from Mexico have called requesting that we pray more earnestly. They would be lost without our assistance if the bridges are closed.



Marisela Guevara (left) works with Sister Ursula to ensure supplies are delivered to those in need at the border.

## Leaving a Legacy

Please consider remembering the Benedictine Sisters in your Legacy Planning. Our legal title is Benedictine Sisters (Congregation of Benedictine Sisters), and we are a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. For more info, contact your estate planner, attorney, or Sr. Sylvia Ahr, OSB, Treasurer at 830.816.8504.



*"Peace is a gift from God, but it requires our efforts.  
Let us be people of peace in prayer and deed."* Pope Francis



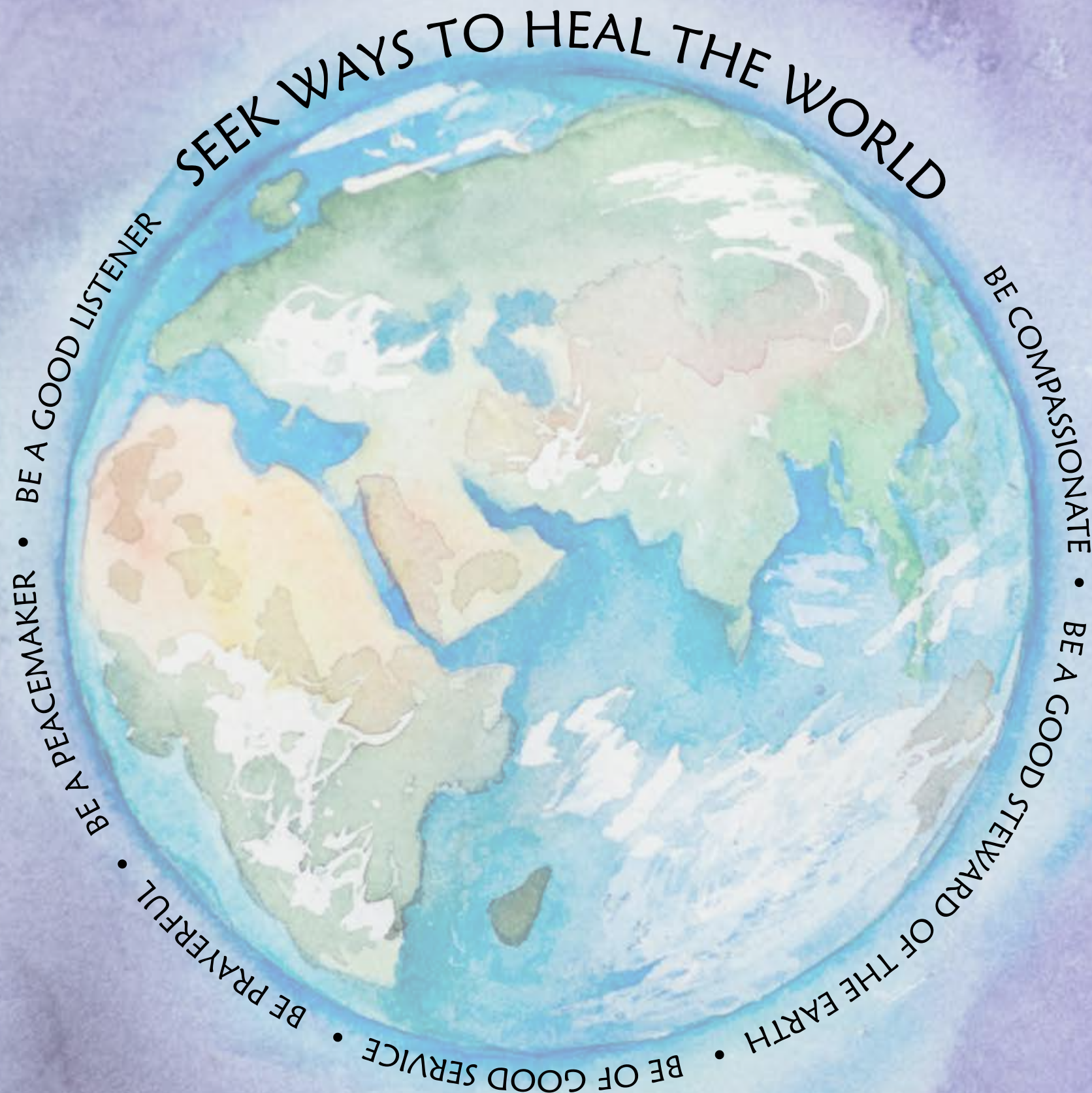
Sisters Victoria Anne Olivares, OSB Mary Agnes Zinni, OSB and Bernice Lindsey, OSB joined several Sisters and friends in a 100th year birthday drive through wave in May for Oblate, Mary Lou Valentino (mother of our development director), who resides in a local assisted living facility.



Sister Sylvia Ahr, OSB helps direct the planting of one of two Bigtooth Maple trees in front of the Omega Chapel. The trees were donated by the Native Plant Society - Boerne Chapter, (Maples for Boerne program).



(L-R) Sister Ursula Herrera, OSB and visiting Benedictine Sister, Teresa Ann Wolf of Watertown, SD, prepare donations for distribution at the Texas/Mexico border.



## Mission Statement

*We are called to seek God in community and to respond in ministry through sharing our spirituality and addressing the needs of the people we serve, especially the poor.*



Praying together for peace and healing throughout the world, March 2020, at Omega's Outdoor Chapel.



Sister Susan Mika, OSB, participates in the annual Martin Luther King, Jr. March in San Antonio, January 2020.



Taking time to listen in a busy, noisy world.



# OUR WORK IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

## Omega Retreat Center, the Health & Wholeness Center, and Sisters' Attic

by Sister Bernadine Reyes, OSB, Director of Ministries

Nothing in my life experience could have prepared me for this time of COVID-19. Everything is different, not only in my immediate surroundings, but throughout the world including our regular activities, our ministries, participation in church, gatherings with family and friends, our ability to move around freely, and on and on. This virus, which we cannot see nor control, is forcing us to live life in all its facets in ways we have not considered before.

After leadership, I took a sabbatical and upon return I agreed to the position of Director of Ministries which included Omega Retreat Center, the Health and Wholeness Center (HWC), a ministry for those 50 and older, and Sisters' Attic, a thrift shop that offers an affordable option to the community and provides additional resources to the ministries. This past March, the onset of COVID-19 effectively closed all these ministries. In the beginning, for the retreat groups, there was some optimism that this virus would be controlled within a few months and we would be back up and running. They rescheduled for later in the year, but as we went through April and May, it became clear that it would not be safe to host large groups for some time to come. I wrote a letter to the leaders of the retreat groups that usually come to Omega Retreat Center to update them on our plans to keep the center closed until it is safe to host groups.



Omega's signs of hospitality and comfort remain steadfast during these trying times.



The HWC pool is well maintained, awaiting the return of its members.

The HWC remains closed. Its population, those who are 50 and older, is the most vulnerable group to the COVID-19 crisis. These seniors, who are members of the Center, have repeatedly told us that this ministry is their "home away from home." The most popular program for them is water aerobics, which helps to keep them mobile, but more importantly offers them companionship. It was difficult closing this program knowing what it means to them.

My experience with what was/is happening with these ministries led me to feel alone and inexperienced in navigating through the crisis. Fortunately, an organization I belong to, the American Benedictine Retreat Center Conference, called for a Zoom meeting to talk about what was happening.

I found our conversation very helpful and supportive, but I was also aware that the individuals from this conference were from different states in the US. I felt a need to talk to those retreat centers in Texas. I called the retreat center director in Belton, TX and told him what I was feeling and he agreed that a meeting would be helpful. As a member of the Texas Catholic Retreat Center Directors he initiated a Zoom meeting among the centers. Though these Centers operate in different ways and for different publics, these meeting have been most helpful to give me direction.

These ministries (Omega, the HWC, and Sisters' Attic) brought me into contact with many people on a weekly basis. In March, abruptly, these people were gone. I became so aware that I missed being around them, missed the free interaction in the different occasions of coming together without fear. At the same time, as I listen to reports of the rising number of cases and the extraordinary burden on our health system, I am alarmed at the behavior of so many people. It has occurred to me over these past few months that one of the values our American culture holds is the value of "independence". I hear it over and over when people claim their rights from the Constitution to not wear masks. This past July 4th holiday there were large gatherings along the rivers. It makes me wonder what happened to the value of caring for community, and the value of greatest commandment, "to love others as I love myself." What do these behaviors say about our society?

This virus is going to be with us for a long time. Questions I ask myself these days are, what is the call to me personally, and to us as a people in this new time? What is the new call in these ministries? These questions are challenging but not frightening even as there seems to be no end in sight. Maybe the call is to hold fast to the belief in what Jesus said, "I will be with you always."

# OUR COMMUNITY IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES

## AGELESS GRACE



(L-R): Sisters Antoinette Van Galen, Mary Agnes Zinni, Mary Louise Hernandez, and Mary Rose Goertz

When news came in March that the first case of COVID-19 had reached our relatively small community of Boerne, TX, there was no question as to what needed to be done. Four of our Sisters are in their nineties and our first priority was to protect them, as well as all our Sisters, from being exposed to the virus. We immediately closed the Monastery to the public and our offices closed as well.

In this unprecedented time, we rely on God's grace to see us through. We sought the wisdom of our nonagenarians and asked the following:

How is God's Grace present to you in this time of isolation? Below are their responses:

"Grace is the supernatural gift from God. In the grace of isolation, wrapped in darkness of the unknown, lies the hope and dreams drawn by light I cannot see. In the misery of all this, I depend on God's grace to open to the light and reveal God's plans." *Sister Antoinette*

"As I write, the news reports that globally 10,507,983 persons have been ill with the Coronavirus and 512,071 have died. In my daily personal prayer, I especially ask our loving God to forgive the failings of all of us in the world, and in mercy and compassion, for us to lead the medical profession to discovering the right vaccine to bring an end to the pandemic soon and very soon. Personally, I have been well and I thank God for this precious gift." *Sister Mary Agnes*

"I talk to God all the time. God's grace is with everybody. I rely on God's grace because you never know what is going to happen. Trust." *Sister Mary Louise*

"It's the way it was before. God's grace is all powerful and all knowing. I am not afraid with whatever is going on. I talk to God about it all the time." *Sister Mary Rose*

## Outreach From the Monastery



Throughout the pandemic, our Sisters have kept family, friends, Oblates, benefactors, and our local and global communities close in prayer. They have also written cards and made phone calls to many who are isolated and most vulnerable. The Sisters continue to uplift everyone in prayer throughout these uncertain times.



## Benedictine Sisters Celebrate Catholic Sisters Week

"Fifty-two weeks a year women religious stand with the poor and the immigrant, teach children, fight injustice, heal the sick, share spirituality, empower women, defend the planet, promote peace, create community, offer hope and so much more. But for one week (March 8-14, 2020), we shine the spotlight on women religious." [www.catholicsistersweek.org](http://www.catholicsistersweek.org)



Catholic Sisters Week (CSW) began in 2015 as a part of National Women's History Month. Under the direction of Communicators for Women Religious, its purpose is to bring to light the spirituality, mission, and community building of women religious. The Benedictine Sisters of Boerne celebrated this nationwide event in March with an array of activities. A Mass for Healing and Peace Throughout the World was held on Sunday, March 1st at the Omega Outdoor Chapel; the St. Scholastica Monastery staff held a Blessing for the Sisters and hosted a special brunch in their honor; and the Health and Wholeness Center collaborated with Hill Country Daily Bread by sponsoring an Easter food drive. More events were planned during the month, but were canceled due to the COVID-19 virus.



(L-R) Debi Watson with Hill Country Daily Bread, accepts donations from Christy Hanich, manager of the Health and Wholeness Center, and Sister Bernadine Reyes, OSB Director of Ministries.

**Carolyn's Blessing** by Carolyn Ruiz, Elder Care Coordinator  
Benedictine Sisters ~ You should know that you are an inspiration to me. I have seen how you work tirelessly to accomplish the goals you have set for yourselves in the work of God. Your hearts are towards the people that have heavy burdens. God says in Isaiah, "To lift up the hands that hang down and straighten the feeble knees." You are women of God that take care of God's church, which are his people. You encourage through the wisdom that God has imparted to you. These things inspire me, and I know the Love of God shines forth through you. I, too, have compassion for the people and that is what called to me to become a nurse.

Today, I bless you, my sisters in Christ, that God gives you the endurance to finish the race that he has called you to. May God give the wisdom, patience, and peace needed. That he is a lamp unto your feet and that he blesses your paths. May God bless you and keep you in Health.



The Benedictine Sisters of Boerne having fun at the Catholic Sisters Week appreciation brunch hosted by the St. Scholastica Monastery staff on Tuesday, March 10, 2020. Front row, seated (L-R) Sr. Antoinette, Sr. Germaine, Sr. Mary Rose, Sr. Mary Agnes, Sr. Victoria Anne, Back row, standing (L-R) Sr. Frances Briseño, Prioress, Sr. Michael, Sr. Bernadine, Sr. Sylvia, Sr. Mary Louise, Chon (novitiate), and Sr. Kathleen. (Not pictured: Sisters Bernice, Susan, and Ursula.)

## Unexpected Opportunity

The Air Conditioning System in our three year old Monastery went out on March 16. We have been without AC since then. The Sisters managed to survive the heat with the help of fans until May. One of our Sisters had a heat stroke and another sister was showing signs of a heat stroke. At that point Sr. Frances asked all the Sisters to pack up a few necessary belongings and move to Lidwina's Dwelling at Omega Retreat Center. We have been there ever since.

In spite of the pandemic which is keeping us away from normal activity and from all of you and being displaced from our home, we find our hearts grateful. Unfortunately, our retreat center had to close because of COVID-19, so there was plenty of room for us to take up residence. When we moved to Boerne in 1962, the space we are



(R) Sister Frances Briseño, OSB visits with a few of the Sisters in their temporary living space at Lidwina's Dwelling.

now occupying was the original Monastery. We have spent much time reminiscing about this place and enjoying quite a bit of laughter in our remembering. For many of us, our old Chapel was the place where we learned to pray and take time for silence. The sacred energy of that place is still there and all of us are graced to connect to that sacredness.

Our office staff is not able to work a full day because it is over 90° in their offices. Our patience is wearing thin at this point, but we trust that all those working on our behalf to fix the problem are doing their best. We also are very aware that our little problem is nothing in comparison to those dealing with the major problems that confront

our world! We ask for your prayers during this time. God has given us an opportunity to look at ourselves and to look all that burdens our world at this time from a new place, with a new lens, with new perspective. May we use this time to imagine a new way of being upon our return.

**We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-Corona existence was not normal, other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction... We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment, one that fits all of humanity and nature.**

Sonya Renee Taylor

## Unexpected Blessings

*Though we needed to cancel our annual Spaghetti Dinner & Silent Auction and our None's Ball, we are filled with deep gratitude for the continued support from all our family, friends, and donors during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic.*

*A special thank you to SOAR! (Support our Aging Religious) for their Rapid Response Grant of \$7,500 in support of our elder Sisters.*

**Stay connected with us.  
New website coming soon!**



**[www.boernebenedictines.org](http://www.boernebenedictines.org)**

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*“Be a lamp  
or a lifeboat  
or a ladder.  
Help someone’s soul heal.”*

*Rumi*