

Living Lectio: Founding of St. Placid Priory

by Sister Laura Swan, OSB

Tenacity, perseverance, vision, faith, flexibility and a healthy sense of humor; all these were among the virtues called forth from the women who would become our founding members. Ask any of our surviving founding members of these early days leading up to 1952 and you will receive a smile and lighthearted laugh!

In 1947 Sister Placidia Haehn was named Superior of the Holy Rosary community and given the task of working with Mother Rosamond Pratschner, President of the new Congregation of St. Benedict, in finalizing the long-held dream of an autonomous monastery in the Pacific Northwest. In the ensuing years Sister Placidia tenaciously pursued Bishop Shaughnessy and later Archbishop Connolly for the required signatures for this dream to be fulfilled. Archbishop Connolly encountered a woman of strength and determination equal to his!

By early 1952 it became evident that the Priory was closer than ever to becoming a reality. The call went forth for volunteers to become founding members and the search for land began in earnest. Archbishop Connolly wanted the new monastery outside the Seattle or Tacoma area where numerous motherhouses already existed. So Sister Placidia and her committee began their search for suitable land in the Olympia, Lake St. Claire and Longview areas. The original dream was to build a girls' high school and college along with the new priory.

An interesting dynamic developed: Archbishop Connolly, wanting a larger Benedictine presence than Mother Rosamond could offer, began to informally barter his approval of a land site to press for a larger presence of nuns. For months, the Sisters pursued land for the new monastery, and Archbishop Connolly continually found reasons to reject the proposed site. He then suggested that a larger founding membership would be far more conducive to these budding plans. After weeks of fervent negotiation and months of searching for a suitable site, a new community was born. The Sisters purchased the Meeker estate on Mud Bay in West Olympia and Archbishop Connolly finally signed the necessary papers. On June 28, 1952 St. Placid Priory was born. Many of the 35 founding members had served in the area for many years, and a few were native born. Some Sisters had heartily volunteered for the new monastery, never having seen the Pacific Northwest; some figured that since they couldn't be members in the new China mission, Tacoma would do!

Within days of our establishment, friends were out at the new

Mud Bay property working hard. The home needed to be converted into the new priory, with chapel, workspace and offices. Soon space for formation and the new members would also be necessary. Hard labor, hot food, household supplies and building equipment were generously donated. These endeavors continued throughout the summer. These friends would soon form the St. Placid Circles in parishes, the Benedictine Boosters and the St. Placid Club. They have remained faithful friends throughout the years.

On July 8, Sister Placidia Haehn was elected our first Prioress and on July 15, the first Mass at the new priory was celebrated. The Sisters were plunged into their new lives. Sister Placidia and Archbishop Connolly were finalizing plans for the Benedictine Sisters to establish two new schools in Tacoma and Puyallup. Some Sisters returned to summer school to continue their education and others were off to the first national gathering of Women Religious, Congregation gatherings, Sister Formation conferences and other assorted activities. They, and we, haven't slowed down since!

Living Lectio: Pioneering Years

With the coming of June, our community begins a year of Jubilee and a living lectio of gratitude. We celebrate 50 years as an independent monastery and 110 years of presence and ministry in the Pacific Northwest. We will be reflecting upon our heritage, pondering the gifts bestowed by our Benedictine foremothers and celebrating who we have become.

Our story actually begins before the beginning. In 1881, six Benedictine Sisters from Minnesota established a mission in Grande Ronde, Oregon with the hopes of an independent monastery. Their plans were interrupted and the dream went underground. In 1892, another opportunity emerged for a mission in the Pacific Northwest and three Sisters arrived in Tacoma. Our Sisters took responsibility for the new Holy Rosary School. Their new home consisted of two rooms on the third floor of the school (still under construction) with cracks in the roof that gave them a view of the stars at night. When the rainy season arrived, they moved to the ground floor of the school. Several blocks away a one room cabin on stilts served as their refectory, kitchen and community space. Soon other Sisters arrived to help with the growing school.

This mission grew but attempts to form an independent monastery were repeatedly delayed. Two World Wars and several major economic depressions proved major challenges to their dreams.

The Bishops of Seattle remained consistently supportive of the Benedictine Sisters and tried many different, creative ways to make the dream of an independent monastery a reality.

In 1925, more Sisters arrived to staff the new Visitation School in south Tacoma. The Benedictine presence grew. So did our Benedictine foremothers love for the people of the Puget Sound region. These women built a heart-felt connection with their neighbors—and collaboration with our friends became a way of life. South Tacoma had truly become "home" and young women from the area traveled to Minnesota in order to join in the life of the Sisters they came to love.

There are dear memories of trips to Mount Rainier and the ocean, fishing, Mass and devotions shared with the parish community, and roller-skating down the hardwood halls of the schools--habits "blowing in the wind." Hours were spent teaching classes, summer CCD along with art and private music lessons, helping with choirs, feeding many who came quietly to the back door of the convent. In their "spare" time, the Sisters were utilizing every free evening, weekend and summer completing university degrees. Life was very full and the Sisters were being immersed in the realities of the Pacific Northwest.

We honor these pioneering women who embraced an unknown frontier, confronting their fears and living into the adventure of monastic life in a new home. Our Benedictine foremothers have taught us to live into crises and opportunities and confusing circumstances with courageous faith, trusting in God's Providential care. They were women rooted in prayer: daily Mass, praying the Divine Office, devotions and time for private prayer was the source of their strength and sustenance.

Our Benedictine foremothers built a significant presence with few personal resources but an abundance of friends. They have shown us that littleness can accomplish great things. At times, life has felt shaky and precarious, but our faithful friends have encouraged us to continue through times of doubt and uncertainty to uncover God's Will in our lives. Friends are a great treasure indeed!

These Benedictine ancestors of ours embraced continuous change: exterior and interior. They left the comforts of Minnesota, uprooted from family, friends and the familiar. Adapting to what they found became a way of life. At times, the personal sacrifice was great; however their love for religious life and their students overcame this sense of loss. But then, they always loved an adventure! They show us the myriad possibilities awaiting us when we courageously let go of the

comfortable and trust into the future. Their lives were motivated by their love for God, the Church, students and their families. They exemplified the Benedictine motto, That in All Things, God May Be Glorified!

Living Lectio: Unexpected Twists and Turns 1960 - 1980

Our Sisters began their new lives as the Benedictine Sisters of St. Placid Priory under the presumption that they would be following the model of their founding house—St. Benedict's Convent. Plans were drawn up for the new Saint Placid Priory with High School and College for women. Sisters continued their own education with these plans in mind. The first phase of fundraising and development resulted in the completion of the new St. Placid Priory and High School, opened in 1961.

Fortunately our Sisters had long cultivated a strong foundation of prayer and discernment, as our future was to be one of surprise upon surprise. The Second Vatican Council challenged our Sisters to explore and return to our monastic roots. The Sisters began the arduous and painful process of renewal: the Liturgy of the Hours was revised into the vernacular and a period of experimentation began that would last for many years. Our faithful and talented musicians met the challenges of ever-changing liturgical expressions, learning new music and eventually beginning to compose their own original music for Mass and Office.

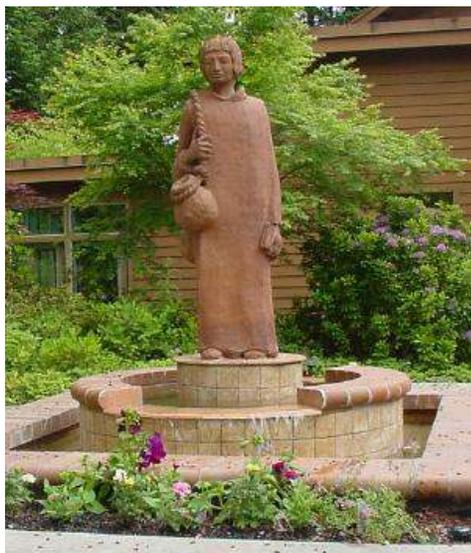
The Sisters returned to original monastic sources, gleaning wisdom for contemporary culture. Sisters attended the Benedictine Institute for Sacred Theology along with other graduate programs in theology and pastoral ministry. In a desire to be one with the laity, the Sisters let go of their religious garb; our life commitment was no longer quite so public. Community living, continued fidelity to prayer and the ever-changing needs of the local Church became our primary concerns with a renewed focus.

Our ministry commitments began to expand and diversify. Sister Damaris Zander and Sister Mary Walczewski became nurses, serving within the Priory and at St. Peter's Hospital. Our ministry of teaching expanded: Sister Eymard Imbierski joined the staff at St. Martin's College, Sister Leonissa Imdieke began teaching English as a Second Language and Sister Angela Hoffman taught at the Pacific Science Center before pursuing her Doctoral Studies.

New expressions of pastoral ministry emerged. Our Sisters, including Sister Ann Notch, Sister Mary Giles Mailhot, Sister Claude Rieland, Sister Magdalen Kiefel and Sister Lucy Wynkoop, began to serve as Directors of Religious Education, outreach to the sick and homebound, and as Pastoral Associates. One also served the Archdiocese as a consultant and another in the Tribunal. Sister Joan Helm ministered to the women in prison at Purdy. Several of our Sisters moved into retreat ministry. These and other ministry experiences prepared us for what would become our tradition: change and adaptation!

The Sisters realized that the depths of change were more than ever anticipated; more layers of the onion were still to be peeled back. The community moved into a new level of radical discernment. St. Placid High School was no longer a viable ministry. The building had severe limitations, especially in light of the direction the community sensed the Holy Spirit was leading us. Forms of monastic leadership were being reconsidered. A greater desire for pastoral ministry at the monastery remained alive.

1985 became a pivotal year. After years of Sr. Jarlath Rademacher's leadership through challenging times, the Community began a series of painful and hope-filled changes. St. Placid High School was closed; the Priory Spirituality Center and Priorywood Daycare were opened. And with Sister Magdalen Keifel's assumption of leadership the following year, the twists and turns began anew....



Living Lectio: An Ancient Identity Emerges

After several years of active discernment, the Sisters made the decision to sell the Priory complex and begin anew. The Sisters desired a monastery that would support growing pastoral ministries and deepening community life. Plans were drafted as dreams were articulated. The second St. Placid Priory was sold to a Japanese college and ground was broken for the new monastery. The fertile soil of our own lives was also broken and prepared for new growth. Our time in diaspora opened us to new ways of being community, and of relating to friends and family. Associates, Boosters and St. Placid Club members reached out in support; new possibilities were envisioned.

The new monastery grew out of the values of the Sisters: simple, rooted in the environment, reflective of the culture of the Pacific Northwest. Every effort was made to save trees and protect wetlands. The monastery is designed for easy access and to welcome all guests as Christ. A retreat house was included for the growing Priory Spirituality Center; later, space was made for the Priory Store. The chapel was designed to be open for visitors seeking a place for prayer. Simplicity prevails throughout. We have continued our commitment to care for the environment: protecting and cultivating the wetlands, diversifying the forest of trees and caring for the plants.

The Sisters came to discover that, as we shape a building for who we think we are at the time of construction, the building in turn begins to shape its new occupants. Our experience of living community deepened. Missions began to close and Sisters moved home; ministry became increasingly focused on our monastic tradition and the desire of the People of God for a deepening of the contemplative in their own lives. With our new monastery, greater numbers of people began to join us for Mass and Liturgy of the Hours. Many join us after Sunday Mass for coffee and conversation. Others stop in for brief moments of prayer and quiet throughout the week. Our library is frequented; guests are a common sight.

We have continued our commitment to the Liturgy of the Hours as well as our peace and justice work. We continue to seek ways to share our spirituality and monastic tradition. The Associates have continued to increase, attracting a diverse group of people. Now we have an Oblate program that is growing, offering another level of commitment and involvement in our community.

Our international connections have broadened and deepened. Before the diaspora, we shared the second Priory building with the Japanese College, and lasting friendships were forged with some of the students. It is here that the seeds of our African connection germinated. In the years to come, hundreds of boxes of books and school supplies would find their way to women's Benedictine communities in Nigeria, Namibia and Tanzania as well as The Philippines. This relationship blossomed into our connection and commitment to the Benedictine Sisters of St. Agnes, Chipole in Tanzania. Swahili is now heard in our halls along with English. Sisters Beatrice, Redemista, Anamaria and Redempta teach us of the ways to be Benedictine with an eastern African flavor. This is a nice mirroring of our Federation of Saint Benedict, which now includes member monasteries in Japan, Taiwan, Puerto Rico and The Bahamas.

Over the years our friends and collaborators have become an increasingly rich and diverse group. Many faith traditions, many flavors of Christianity and many languages now grace our monastery. A commitment to the contemplative life, to peace and justice and the common search for God bind us together. We are blessed with writers and artists, activists and prayers, musicians, spinners and knitters. Friends help us with our ministries and hospitality; they are lecturing and serving at Mass. Some have graciously shared their musical talents with the Schola.

We do not know what God has in store for our future. We know that our friends, Associates and Oblates will be a significant part of that future. We invite women whose lives are prayerful and compassionate to consider melding their lives and calling with ours. Our faith commitment to the "place of littleness" where the Holy Spirit has put us is well expressed in the new home for little St. Placid, given by our friends, where he waits to greet all guests who come to seek life.



Overview of St. Placid Priory's History

- 480: Benedict and his twin sister, Scholastica, were born near Rome. Benedict wrote a Rule--that is, a guide for the spiritual journey-- that would become the norm for monasticism in the Western world.
- 1035: St. Walburga's Benedictine Monastery is refounded in Eichstätt, Bavaria.
- 1852: Sister Benedicta Riepp of Eichstätt comes to America and establishes several communities, including St. Benedict's in St. Joseph, Minnesota.
- 1892: Benedictine Sisters from St. Benedict's arrive in Tacoma to work in the schools.
- 1952: St. Placid Priory is established as an independent monastery. Our first priory was at Mud Bay, Olympia with 35 Sisters.
- 1961: The new St. Placid Priory and St. Placid High School was built (in what is now Lacey).
- 1985: St. Placid High School was closed. Priory Wood Daycare, The Priory Spirituality Center and Conference Center were opened.
- 1992: Responding to the call to a more monastic lifestyle, the new Priory was built on adjoining land.
 - The Priory Spirituality Center re-opened with a capacity to house 19 retreatants.
 - Listening With the Spirit, our spiritual direction formation program began. We continue to offer short and long term programs, retreats, and spiritual direction.
 - The Conference Center was also re-opened.
- Currently: Continuing to respond to God's call.
 - We now operate The Priory Spirituality Center and Store.
 - We are also engaged in helping to educate African Benedictine Sisters.
 - The Knitters and Spinners are an active group of Sisters and volunteers.
 - Invite varying forms of membership: Sisters, Oblates, Affiliates, and Associates.