

OUR LADY OF THE MISSISSIPPI ABBAY

VOLUME 14 ISSUE 1
FEBRUARY 2013



monastery news

Few events bring more joy to a monastic community than the solemn profession of a new member. This past September, on the feast of the Triumph of the Cross, our Sister Myra Hill pronounced her solemn vows at a festive Eucharist, in the presence of our Father Immediate, Dom Brendan Freeman of New Melleray, and our abbess, Mother Rebecca Stramoski. Of course, quite a lot of other people were present too! Many of our brothers came from New Melleray, and some of Sr Myra's family, including her father, grandmother, two aunts and an uncle, drove all the way from Ontario for the occasion (her mother, alas, was unable to travel at the time, and so could not be with us).

A native of Rochester NY, Myra began considering religious life when she was in college. "I had become acquainted with the Rule of St. Benedict," she says, "and was captivated by stories of the desert fathers and mothers, those early monks and nuns who inhabited the deserts of Egypt and Syria in

the 4th and 5th centuries. I began to wonder how I could give my whole self to God with as much dedication as the early desert dwellers had. I wanted to live simply and purposefully, focused

on gospel values and not giving in to society's demands to produce, consume, and make money."

To follow Jesus into the desert, Myra entered the Benedictine double monastery in Pecos, New Mexico. Their main source of support is the care of retreatants, and after a couple of years she found herself desiring a more contemplative way of life. She returned to Rochester and spent a few years teaching religion classes to junior high students, while completing a master's degree in theological studies at St Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry. A friend suggested that she visit Mississippi Abbey, and after a few years of visiting and discerning, Myra

entered our community in May 2006. We ask you to join us in praying for our newly professed sister!



Top: Sr Myra Hill, with her grandmother, Elsie Hill, and her father, Burt Hill.

Bottom: M Rebecca clothes Sr Myra with the monastic cowl, while Sr Nettie assists.



Our "75 Club": Srs Mary Ann, Ann Marie, Carol, Gail and Rosemary

On the feast of the Birth of Mary (September 8), Philip and Sasha, and a good contingent of M.Columba's family, joined us for a blessing and unveiling of the statue. This would be the first time we saw it, and the minute the covering came off, what had been a lovely celebration became something profoundly spiritual, as the beauty of the image touched us all deeply. Our Lady of the Mississippi is a pilgrim woman, strong but gentle, walking on the waters with her hair flowing out behind, a catfish under her feet; and in her arms, the baby Jesus, lifting his hand in blessing. The statue is in the front circle outside our main door and the church, and we are working on landscape plans which will include some flowing water...

But this is not the only new image of Our Lady to grace our monastery this year. The wall outside the prayer room and the library in our new wing has a space for an icon, and we commissioned Sr Nettie's sister, Mary Barrett, to write an icon of Our Lady for this spot. Mary did the icon of Our Lady of Tenderness in our candy house prayer room some years ago, and we wanted to draw the two prayer spaces together in this way. The new icon arrived in December, and on January 1st, feast of Mary Mother of God, we had the icon displayed in our church sanctuary, blessed, and then placed in its new home, where it too gives us much joy and spiritual nourishment.

We used to have our own icon-writer, our Sr Suzanne, but for several years now she has been living at our monastery of Redwoods, in California. Sr Suz is a California native, and in fact she is the only one at Redwoods from that area of California. This past October she changed her stability to Redwoods, and while we miss her very much, we are happy to know she is doing well at Redwoods - and very much keeping up her labor as an icon writer.

In our last letter we told you about Sr Regina's 85th birthday celebration. Well, since then, we have had no fewer than four 75th birthdays, all of which we celebrated with a community dinner party. Sr Mary Ann began the season in July, followed by Sr Carol in October, and Srs Ann Marie and Gail in January. Sr Rosemary, recently retired as superior of our daughter-house in Norway, is also a member of this age group (although her birthday is not until March), and to our delight she spent a month of her sabbatical with us, over the Christmas holidays - so our "75 Club" was complete for a while.

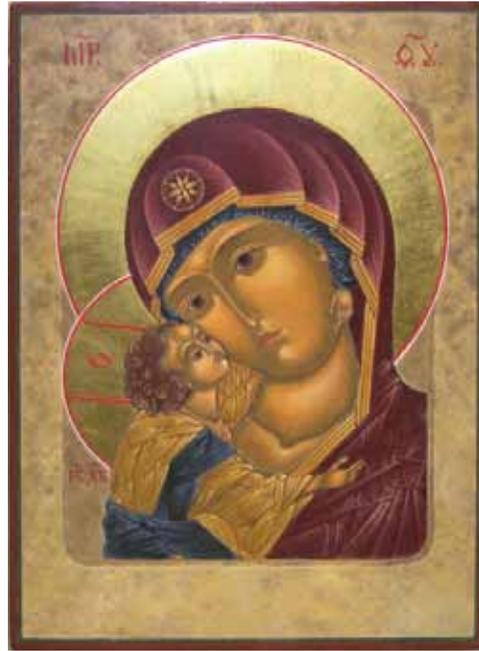
The last, but by no means least, of the Big Events since we last wrote was the Silver Jubilee of our Sister Martha, celebrated last July. A native of Erie, Pennsylvania, Martha Juskewycz from early childhood had a sense of belonging to God. "I cried and cried when they wouldn't let me receive First Holy Communion when I was six," she says, laughing at her younger self. "I



Our Lady of the Mississippi

While Sr Myra's profession was a high-point, September was quite an exciting month for us in other ways as well. Twice a year, all the bishops and major superiors of Catholic religious congregations in Iowa (including our abbess, and the abbot of New Melleray) meet for two days, and this year, in honor of the 175th anniversary of the Dubuque archdiocese, the September meeting was here in Dubuque - in fact, at our brothers' monastery. Since our own monastery is too small to hold such a meeting, Archbishop Hanus asked if he could host a dinner for the group here, and we were delighted to have this opportunity to meet the leaders of the Church in our area. After tours of our new wing and a marvelous (catered!) meal, we all prayed Compline together in the abbey church.

But the first major event of the month was something we have been planning for several years. We have never had a major sign of our faith in the exterior area of our abbey, where it would meet the eyes of visitors immediately, except for a large but not very conspicuous cross



Our Lady of Tenderness

on the front of the old part of the house. When our first abbess, Mother Columba, died in September of 2009, we received a number of donations in her memory which became the seedbed for a new artistic project. After much research, we commissioned Philip Howie, a sculptor from upstate New York, to make a 4-foot bronze-cast statue of Our Lady of the Mississippi for us.

Philip visited us a couple of times with small models to get our input on his designs, and then made the full-sized clay statue that would be used to cast the bronze. He had barely finished when Hurricane Irene brought severe floods to the Northeast, including his studio - but he rescued the statue, emailing us pictures of Our Lady of the Mississippi riding over the floods in a handcart. A narrow escape! Unfortunately, the next event was more serious: although still fairly young, Philip had a severe stroke shortly after the flood. After his immediate recovery was in hand, his wife Sasha (also an artist) took over working with the foundry to cast the statue, and sent us progress reports on Philip's recovery, which for a time was painfully slow. The stroke affected especially his right side (he is right-handed), but when he was finally able to travel here, he brought with him a number of marvelous new drawings - all done left-handed.

kept saying, ‘I do understand!’” During her teens, she began to realize that this sense of belonging to God was at heart a vocation to religious life, but she wasn’t sure she “wanted” to enter a religious community. So she studied to become a dietitian, receiving a bachelor’s degree from Rochester Institute of Technology and a masters from the University of Wisconsin - and then landed her “dream job,” teaching at a university (Northern Arizona).

But God has a way of keeping at us, and she soon found that even her dream job was not enough to satisfy her heart’s deepest longing. So in 1983 she entered our monastery of Santa Rita, in Sonoita AZ. She left shortly before final vows and worked at a Native American reservation in upstate New York before joining Mississippi in 1990, attracted

by “the openness of the community and the beauty of the place,” and made her solemn vows in 1994.

Sr Martha’s father, a native Ukrainian who came to the U.S. after World War II, was too ill to come for the jubilee celebration (he has since passed over to join his wife before the Heavenly Father), but three of her siblings and a bevy of friends were present at the Mass where Sr Martha renewed her vows and re-dedicated her life to Jesus.

May God bless you with his holiness in this time of Lent, and with a joyful and hope-filled celebration of his Son’s resurrec-

tion. You are in our prayers!

The Sisters of Mississippi Abbey

Photo/Bill Witt



Sr Martha Juskewycz, jubilarian