

# OUR LADY OF THE MISSISSIPPI ABBAY

VOLUME 17 ISSUE 2  
OCTOBER 2016



Few events are more joyful for a community than the admission of a new member to final vows. On August 19, the feast of Blessed Gueric of Igny, our Sr Anna Mary O'Meara pronounced her solemn vows to God as a Cistercian nun.

The roots of Sr Anna's vocation go back to her childhood. As a little girl growing up in Detroit, she was deeply impressed by the Servite priests and sisters who staffed her family's parish. In fact she loved the sisters so much that "I would stay at school until the last sister went home." When she was nine her mother died rather suddenly, and family circumstances led her to enter the convent at the start of high school. Although she eventually left the Servites "to finish the process of adolescence," her years with them laid a strong foundation for

her spiritual life, and she remained close to the community.

During her years as a Servite, Janet (as she was then called) began her career as a teacher. She did graduate studies at Creighton and taught middle school. In the mysterious ways of divine providence she actually spent a year in Dubuque (studying Scripture and liturgical theology at the Aquinas Institute) without ever encountering either our monastery or our brothers'.

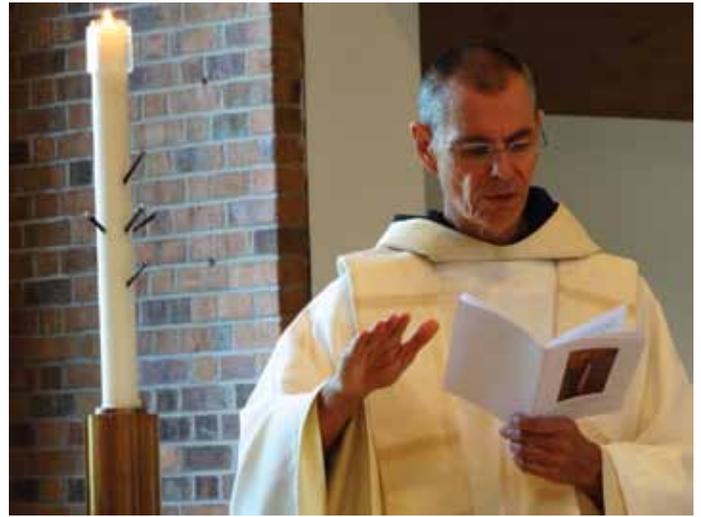
After she left the Servites Janet completed a doctorate in religious studies at the Catholic University of America. Then God brought her back to Dubuque again: she was hired by Clarke College to teach theology. She chaired the Religious Studies department for 20 years, and during this time met and married Michael O'Meara, a Dubuque native. It was a "very happy, God-centered marriage," with both of them quite active in St Columkille's parish; but after nine years Michael was called home to God. "I participated profoundly in Michael's illness, dying and death – his sharing in Christ's passion and death – and experienced a conversion that redirected my life and eventually led me to the monastery."

In fact, it was her husband who introduced Janet to Trappist life, with a visit to our brothers at New Melleray. Her first contact with Mississippi was in 1998, when she taught some of our young





*M. Rebecca and Dom Mark of New Melleray (who presided at the Mass) pray over Sr Anna.*



*Sr Ciaran gives Sr Anna the sign of peace.*



*Sr Anna and her beloved brother Victor, who has supported her through all the stages of her life.*

sisters a course in Christology, and this encounter with our monastery affected her profoundly.

In 2005 Janet joined the Associates of the Iowa Cistercians, a lay group associated jointly with New Melleray and Mississippi abbeys. A few years later she retired from Clarke “to find out what Christ wanted of me,” and began spending more and more time at our monastery, joining us for prayer services, volunteering her labor. By 2011 it was becoming clear to Janet and to us that God was calling her to give her life to him as a member of our community. When she received the Cistercian habit on August 20, 2011, she took the name “Anna Mary,” after Anna the prophetess (Lk 3), and Mary, the woman of sorrows, who pondered the word in her heart. Sr Anna is a mainstay on our candy production, handling the physically most demanding jobs with aplomb, as well as serving the community in sacristy and kitchen and many other areas.

On a much lesser level, our summer had more than its share of excitement in a very different area. In July a bolt of lightning hit a tall, beautiful pine tree towering over the “old” part of our monastery, the original Stampfer home. The trunk shattered into three sections and shards flew over a 50-foot radius. An underground conduit carrying electricity to our front fountain system was also partly shattered, and torrential rain water started pouring out of the electric circuit box in the basement.

How amazing is God’s providence – our electrician was on the property at the time! After shutting down the electricity he went to work and power was restored in fairly short order. However, our fountain system remained down for a couple of months, as its repair was superseded by a more serious structural crisis.

## BLESSED GUERRIC of IGNY

Blessed Gueric is of the generation of the Cistercian founders. With St Bernard, St Aelred of Rievaulx and William of St. Thierry, he is honored as one of the four “Cistercian evangelists.” Gueric was probably born between 1070 and 1080. A native of Tournai, France, he was educated at the city’s cathedral school. After living as a solitary for some years, Gueric visited Clairvaux to see Bernard, who counseled him to enter the novitiate there. He was elected the second abbot of Igny, Clairvaux’s fourth foundation, in 1138.

Gueric was a humble monk with a placid temperament. We know him through his fifty-four liturgical sermons – fraternal, familial talks given by the abbot to his monks on major feast days. Abbot Gueric knows his monks well, meets them where they are and encourages their growth in monastic life. His is a positive message of hope, encouragement and joy that is deeply rooted in Christ and Scripture, and continues to resonate with our monastic experience.

*“Now to achieve the wisdom of continuing in wisdom, it is most important, I think, not readily to allow restlessness or any kind of slight provocation to keep you away from any of the exercises of wisdom: the divine office, private prayer, lectio divina, the appointed daily labor or the practice of silence” (Sermon 22:5).*



One of the largest rooms in the original Stampfer home has served for 35 years as our Chapter Room, the room where the monastic community gathers regularly to listen together to a “chapter” from the Rule of St Benedict, to receive spiritual teaching from the abbess, and for other communications and community meetings. We’ve often said that our monastery is “built on rock.” On one level, of course, that refers to the parable in Mt 7 and means that Christ is our foundation. But it also has a literal meaning for us, and nowhere is that truer than the section around our chapter room and front door. The ground there is the highest part of the bluff on which the monastery is built, and much of it is an enormous rock. As a result, there is no basement here, only a very small crawl space.

One day in July Sr Myra, our cellarer, discovered that the crawl space was wet. We soon realized that the grading outside the chapter room had changed over the years as we made various improvements to the landscape and walks out front. It seems that for years now water has been draining toward the house, rather than away from it, causing the sill plate and floor joist ends to rot, and part of the wall to start sagging.

The “crawl space” is actually too small even to crawl in, so it was a major project just to find out the extent of the problem. Also, when the Stampfer home was built in the 1950’s it used state-of-the-art technology. It is very heat-efficient, with pipes in the floors carrying radiant heat throughout the house. Yes, very efficient for heating, but it added to the difficulty of accessing the tiny space under the floor!

After weeks of angst and consultations, the problem was solved in two steps, both of them difficult. The sill plates and joist ends were replaced and ventilation added; and we put a drainage pipe through our front yard – which entailed drilling through the rock. As we go to press, the front lawn is tidy, the wall is supported, the fountains are back running, and all that remains to be done is to check the heating pipes, re-cover them in concrete, and finally replace the oak floor planks. We are immensely grateful to God that the whole problem was discovered and resolved before winter set in – or the wall collapsed!



It was also a blessing that most of the commotion took place apart from the area we spend most of our time: the church, the refectory, the dormitory, the library. The daily monastic round of prayer, work and reading (and sleep!) continues in its quiet and unexciting ways, just as it should. Our prayers include all those whose daily lives are much less stable and peaceful: all the prayer requests we receive, and of course so many people in our world uprooted by war or disasters. The history of the Cistercian Order is full of times when monastic life too, in its European heartland, was anything but peaceful, but instead subject to violence, eviction, destruction of the monastic buildings. Even in recent years, some of our monasteries in Asia and Africa have found themselves in the midst of terror and destruction, along with their neighbors. In this year of a difficult presidential election it's good to remember how truly blessed we are to enjoy the prosperity and peace lacking to so many.

With so much routine in our lives, small things become more precious and important. So the return of chickens to our monastery was a noteworthy event! A number of years ago our Sr Grace raised and cared for a little flock of hens, but after a couple of years we had to give them away as there was not time to care for them. Well, this spring we bought nearly 30 baby chicks of five varieties (Barred Rock, Black Sex Link, Rainbow, Production Red, and Golden Nuggets), and Sr Grace is at it again. The chickens, who range free in our farmyard area during the day, are now full-grown and starting to lay eggs. So, we know which came first: the chickens!

At this time of year we are, as usual, busy making candy. In our work and in our prayer we hold all our friends close to our hearts, in the heart of Jesus, and wish you a most blessed Advent and Christmastide.

*The Sisters of Mississippi Abbey*

