



# Tidings

BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF ANNUNCIATION MONASTERY

SPRING 2004

## Sisters Joyfully Announce Re-Election of Sister Susan Berger As Prioress

By Karen Herzog  
Courtesy of Bismarck Tribune

**I**N THEIR countercultural way, the 80 Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery in Bismarck have re-elected their prioress, Sister Susan Berger, to a third four-year term.

The sisters choose their leader through prayer instead of noise, listening instead of

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**“I’m called to bring forth their (the sisters) gifts and they call forth mine.”**

Sister Susan Berger, OSB

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talking, and feeling for the will of the Holy Spirit instead of political strategizing. It’s called discernment.

“What qualities does the community need?”, they ask themselves and each other. “What service can the community be to the world around it?” “What are its leaders’ gifts and limitations?” The sisters search their hearts, the Rule of Benedict by which they live, the scriptures, their prayers. And they listen for answers because they believe “God is bigger than all,” Sister Susan said.

Instead of coming to the choosing full of their own goals, “If you believe in the spirit, you come (into the process) as empty as possible,” she said.

Part of the discernment process is determining the community’s priorities and its directions — “at this point, where are our hearts called to?” she said.

Some calls they have discerned: Calling forth the gifts of the community’s members, seeking

new members, and articulating Benedictine spiritual values in their ministries and institutions, such as St. Alexius Medical Center and the University of Mary.

“We are an ancient order, a community of women religious. How are those values to be lived out in this time and place?” is the sisters’ quest.

Continuing to develop the hospitality center, where people can come to be refreshed, find peacefulness and quiet, is another goal, she said. In lives with so much busyness, segregation and isolation, that means so much, said Annunciation’s communications director, Jill Ackerman. And the joy, Ackerman said. People don’t realize what joy pervades the sisters’ community life.

The women pray two or three times a day, 365 days a year. “These are really the prayers of the church,” without which this structure would collapse, Sister Susan said.

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Annunciation Monastery sisters bless Sister Susan Berger after her re-election as their prioress.



## Presence of Peace, Hope On the Prairies

Dear friends of Annunciation Monastery,

When we as a monastic community gathered for the discernment process for election of prioress, we asked ourselves what are our priorities in serving the People of God? What are our hearts calling us to?

After much prayer, listening and discussion, we set directions for the next four years.

Among our priorities are calling forth the gifts of each member of our community, inviting and welcoming new members and deepening our monastic living. For 125 years, we have been a vital presence of prayer and service for the people of the prairies and beyond. We are deeply committed to continuing that presence.

In our world today where there is so much violence, busyness and noise, we will persevere in sharing and deepening our Benedictine spirituality and values among ourselves, the Church and especially in our sponsored institutions, St. Alexius Medical Center, Garrison Memorial Hospital and the University of Mary.

### **Prioress Re-elected,** *continued from page 1*

Sister Susan said she's always liked "being out in the action," she said, loving the diversity and challenge of experience as a prioress. Benedictine leaders need the ability to listen "all the way through," she said. "The ability to 'pray with.' Deep faith that God's in charge through all."

The faith that the person chosen also is given "the grace of office," she said. And trust in the community of women. "The community says, 'we're going to walk right there with you.' That is so beautiful and powerful.

"I'm called to bring forth their gifts and they call forth mine," she said.

Benedictine women have been here since 1878, Sister Susan said. They mean to continue a Benedictine presence on the prairie and in North Dakota. "That's part of our breath and fiber," she said

Some of these Benedictine values so important to a wholistic approach to life are respect for persons, moderation in all things, hospitality, prayer, stewardship and community.

As Benedictine monastic women, we seek to be a presence of peace and a beacon of hope to all we serve. We offer our hospitality center to those who are searching for more meaning in life, who want to find peacefulness, quiet and refreshment for their spirits.

In this issue of *Tidings*, we focus on vocation stories of women who have found meaning in their lives by responding to God's call to the monastic life. We invite and welcome women who might be hearing a call to our community to come and visit and learn more about us.

As we move into the future, we ask your prayers for us. We in turn, pray God's blessings on you and your loved ones.



The Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery are delighted to offer a historical overview of their 125 years of "Prayerful Presence on the Prairie," in North Dakota.

To order your DVD, send your address information and \$12 to: Communications Director, Annunciation Monastery, 7520 University Drive, Bismarck, ND 58504

## The Place Where Your Deep Gladness Meets the World's Deep Need

THE above definition of vocation from theologian Frederick Buechner, gives voice to the experience of my heart. Vocation is not so much about what a person does, or even what gifts and talents a person brings, but about who a person is at the core of their being. Vocation is more about sincere desire than proven accomplishment. Vocation is about finding that which gives life deep meaning, energy and passion; it is more often found in questions than answers.

That is why we need each other. I found the courage to listen to my own restless heart because I was blessed with people who affirmed me and affirmed my search - my desire to serve, to join with others in community, to know God's love, to seek deeper meanings in the events I encountered. I was blessed with people who invited me to consider the possibility of a religious life - not as a better way of life than married or single, but as a viable option; not with pressure to succeed or fail,



Sister Kathleen Atkinson

but with encouragement to ask God what God wanted to do with my life and to take the risk to listen.

There are single women in your parish, workplace, family, neighborhood or college campus who share this hunger that I have known. We would like to walk with them, support their questions, and invite the possibility of monastic life. Affirm the search you see in them and invite these women to ask God if monastic life is for them this place of deep gladness and need. Let us know their name and I will give a call for a cup of coffee or slice of pizza. Over and over, I find that when I sit down with someone in such a way, they're pleased that someone else recognized their search and glad to be able to talk about religious life in such a non-threatening way.

Many women hunger for a deeper spirituality and the desire to live the Gospel values with others in a monastic community. You know them. You may be one of them. We would like to know them too.

**To make a donation to vocations activities, please use the enclosed envelope.**

## Thrilled To Be a Sister

WHEN I was growing up, sisters' lives fascinated me. I always wanted to be like them," says Sister Jeanette Hinds. "It was a thrill for me to become a sister and continues to be a thrill to this day."

An upbeat, enthusiastic person, Sister Jeanette notes that she came from a happy home where creativity, faith and music were encouraged. She, her sister, (who later became Sister Millicent) and her brother would spend hours having fun doing music together. Jeanette started learning the violin and piano in the third grade and in the eighth grade began playing the organ.

After earning a music major from the College of St. Benedict, St. Joseph, Minn., she came to

Bismarck and was in the first class of postulants at Annunciation Monastery. "I remember being called 'sister' for the first time by my students, I could hardly believe it - to finally be a sister."

Sister Jeanette appreciates monastic life where people live together and share the same goals. She also relishes the beauty of the communal prayer of the sisters. "When I was thinking of becoming a sister, I just loved praying with them."

An elementary music teacher for 37 years, Sister Jeanette has been active as a parish organist, choral participant and lover of fine music.

She currently is involved in different ministries. She visits people from St. Mary's Parish in the two medical centers in Bismarck and weekly takes the Eucharist to all Catholic patients at MedCenter One. "I like to see different people, talk to them and console them in their illness."



Sister Jeanette Hinds loves to play the violin.

She also plays the violin in the Bismarck-Mandan Symphony. "I enjoy working together with a lot of musicians on wonderful compositions," she exclaims. "I also like getting to know and being friends with all those musicians."

Creativity, faith and music have long been a part of Sister Jeanette's life and she continues to share them with others.

Margaret Nelson, OSB

# A Tale of Two Sisters

JOE Mayer would have “given his farm” to have a nun in the family, he told Sister Helen Margaret as he wrote a check to pay for his daughters’ Catholic school education.

Fortunately, Joe didn’t have to give up the farm, and ended up doubly blessed. Both of his daughters, Rebecca and Rachel became Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery.

Sisters Rebecca and Rachel Mayer grew up on a farm near Regent, ND. They attended summer vacation school and became acquainted with the sisters who taught there. As an 8th grader, Rebecca attended St. Vincent’s school in Mott where she learned to play piano from Sister Leah Marie. She was invited to practice at the sisters’ residence since they had a piano. While practicing, Rebecca always kept one ear on her music and the other on the sisters who always seemed so friendly and happy. Thus began her ministry in music and interest in religious life. Shortly after completing high school, Rebecca joined the Sisters of Annunciation Monastery.

Older sister Rachel was not interested in following in her younger sister’s footsteps. She pursued a nursing degree and worked evenings at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Minot.

While studying for her state boards, Rachel would visit Sister Rebecca at the convent. Subprioress Sister Dorothea would greet her at the door and say with a knowing smile, “So, when are you coming?” Rachel promptly responded, “Never!”

Rachel came to Bismarck later to take her state nursing boards and said to the Lord, “If I pass my



*Students of Cathedral Grade School honor Sister Rachel Mayer with handmade gifts for her dedicated service to the school and the parish*



*Sisters Rebecca (L) and Rachel Mayer grew up in the same family.*

boards and the Yankees win the World Series, I’ll be the happiest person in the world.” She passed her boards the first time, and the Yankees won the Series. She was happy but still felt something important was missing from her life. Rachel finally admitted to herself what she had been denying for so long; she had to follow her call to monastic life.

When Rachel announced her decision to become a sister to her parents, they told her they knew it all along!

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***She was happy but still felt something important was missing from her life. . . she had to follow her call to monastic life.***

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Today Sister Rachel lives at Annunciation Monastery and serves at Cathedral School and Parish where she works with children in preparing their liturgies as well as the confirmation program. She also directs adults involved in the Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) program. Sister Rebecca, also of Annunciation Monastery, lives at St. Alexis Convent where she is a liturgical director and organist. She composes and creates the Liturgy of the Hours books used in the community’s daily praise.

Both sisters feel a very special bond to each other since they have shared their childhood, educational experiences and life in a monastic community.

*Jill Ackerman*

## WHAT'S IT LIKE TO HAVE A DAUGHTER AS A SISTER?

**I**T MAY not be as common these days to hear parents encouraging their children to seek a religious vocation. However, God's voice continues to call those who are willing to listen and respond. Sister Nicole Kunze's parents, Allen and Marilyn, shared these thoughts about having a daughter enter monastic life.



*Sister Nicole Kunze (center) and her parents Marilyn and Allen Kunze enjoy family time together.*

**Q:** How many children do you have?

**A:** We have three children, Nikki (31) is the oldest.

**Q:** How did you integrate religion into family life?

**A:** Attending church faithfully, daily prayers. We tried to teach by example - honesty, involvement, considerate of others, work ethic.

**Q:** Did you ever think any of your children would consider religious life?

**A:** No, not really. But it is something that's in the back of your mind as a Catholic, that one of your children might choose that path.

**Q:** How did you feel when you found out Nikki was interested in becoming a sister?

**A:** Surprised, yet not really. We could tell she had something on her mind for awhile. We always supported our children in their decisions in life or what they wanted to do. If we disagreed, we'd offer our opinion but it was ultimately their decision. In Nikki's case, we were very happy with her decision.

**Q:** Was there anything that led you to believe Nikki would follow a different path than her siblings?

**A:** Yes, we knew she would go places since she was little. She was an overachiever and when she started something, she would finish it. She was strong-willed and determined. When doing something she gave 100 percent or more.

**Q:** Did you have any concerns once Nikki told you she was discerning whether to become a sister?

**A:** We really had no concerns. We thought, if this is what she chooses, we're all for it. All parents want their children to be happy doing what they're doing. And Nikki certainly is.

**Q:** What rewards have you experienced as a result of having a daughter in a religious vocation?

**A:** We've had divine guidance for making some very hard decisions in our lives, like deciding whether to quit farming, and getting through some tough times with illness and death. The Sisters of Annunciation Monastery were a big influence on Nikki's decision while attending University of Mary. We've always said it doesn't hurt having a few extra prayers and intentions said for us!

**Q:** What would you say to other parents who have children considering a religious vocation?

**A:** Give all the encouragement and support you can — it does make you proud to have a son or daughter who has chosen the religious life.

## A Life in the “School of the Lord’s Service”

Faithful perseverance would be one way of describing Sister Marilyn Sieloff’s journey as a monastic woman. The oldest of three children, Marilyn didn’t grow up thinking she would become a sister, however, she had an open heart and mind that would one day respond to God’s call.

While attending North High School in Minneapolis, Marilyn became acquainted with Benedictine Sisters whom she would visit after school. At the age of 16, she followed her friend’s lead and left her Minneapolis home to attend college at the Academy at St. Benedict’s in Minnesota. Their plan was to enter the convent after graduation. Her friend would ultimately leave the convent and Marilyn stayed.

Marilyn’s father, August, thought she would be so homesick she’d come home before three weeks time was up. Her mother, Magdalene, wanted her young daughter to be happy most of all and would not stand in her way.

Sister Marilyn says, “Leaving home at such a young age is still a mystery, I didn’t have any real plans and knew I could return home if I wanted; but something kept me there.” Her faith and perseverance outweighed the pangs of being homesick. “Your relationship with God grows with you. By the time I finished college, that seed that was developing little by little helped me understand what this life was about,” she explains.

In 1940, Sister Marilyn was sent to teach at St. Mary’s High School where she taught for 27 years.

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***“I often think how awesome it is that God chose me to enter the ‘school of the Lord’s service.’ Through the years it has given me a sense of worth and also of responsibility to bear fruit.”***

***Sister Marilyn Sieloff***

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In 1963, Sister Marilyn received her masters degree in theology from St. John’s University. She taught at University of Mary for 18 years, varying subjects such as art, English and theology. Sister Marilyn touched the lives of her students in a profound way. Several of them remain in contact with her through letters and she is frequently surprised when they visit her at Annunciation Monastery.



*Sister Marilyn Sieloff (R) accepts glass of lemonade and chats with a University of Mary student volunteer at Annunciation Monastery.*

Sister Marilyn’s passion for teaching inspired her to start Bible study groups in Bismarck, which she remained a part of for 20 years—two of which continue today. She continues to have a keen interest in the liturgy and the liturgical seasons that reflect the background of her life. Her years of teaching and reading came to a close as her eyesight began to diminish due to macular degeneration. Though her eyesight is failing, Sister Marilyn continues her love of reading by listening to books on tape. Now, at the age of 90, Sister Marilyn’s kind brown eyes may not have keen vision, but they reflect her deep love for God. Her gentle nature reveals a woman of great faith, love, acceptance and perseverance. She marvels in a reflection she wrote in 2002, “I often think how awesome it is that God chose me to enter the “school of the Lord’s service.” Through the years it has given me a sense of worth and also of responsibility to bear fruit. I am convinced that this grace of vocation came because of the Holy Spirit working in me.”

*Jill Ackerman*

# OK God, I'll Be a Sister

ALL children wonder what they're going to be when they grow up. Some lucky people know at a very early age what they are destined to be. That just could be the case with Sister Margaret Nelson.

"From grade school on, I felt called to become a sister but it took a few years for me to say "yes" to that call," admits Sister Margaret. Early in life, Margaret overcame an obstacle that could have caused her faith to waiver throughout life, but the opposite happened. Her faith strengthened.

At 10 months old, baby Margaret slipped into a week-long coma after becoming infected with encephalitis. Miraculously she survived and recovered. The illness left her with a paralyzed tongue

and lips. "Being physically challenged at such a young age helped me develop a close relationship with God," explains Sister Margaret. Her family nurtured and supported her, but she continued to yearn for a deeper relationship with God.

Once in high school, she observed the sisters who ran the school at what she calls "close range." She always had an inner tugging to become a sister one day, but was reluctant to give up what she considered freedom. Following graduation, Margaret attended Minot University and found herself homesick, not for home, but for Annunciation Monastery and the natural beauty surrounding it.

She listened for God's call and relented, "OK God, you can have your way, I'll be a sister." In that freeing decision, she explains, "I have found more freedom for spiritual growth, career opportunities and to love and care for people than I thought possible. My friendship with God continues to grow and deepen. I am glad I said "Yes" to that deepest desire within me, calling me to Annunciation Monastery.

Today Sister Margaret serves as secretary to the prioress, assists with communications and prepares the chapel for Eucharist. She enjoys reading, graphic design and walking in nature. Never too busy to extend hospitality and kindness to all she encounters, Sister Margaret appreciates the uniqueness of each person and their own special gifts.

*Jill Ackerman*



*Sister Margaret Nelson (L) visits with Subprioress Sister Patricia Schap.*



## ***In Loving Memory of Sister Norberta Schwegler***

***August 3, 1914  
March 2, 2004***

Sister Norberta loved children and teaching. She taught elementary grades for 44 years in schools in western North Dakota.

She had a great devotion to St. Anthony. Sometimes when people lost things, they came to her asking her to pray to St. Anthony that the lost item would be found. And most times they were.

She will be remembered for her care and concern for others, spirit of determination, deep faith in God and faithfulness to her Benedictine community and family, especially her twin, Sister Norbert.



*Sister Harlindis Fischer (R) celebrated her 100th birthday Feb. 17. Sisters Susan Berger (L), Sister Joseph Dukart, the monastic community and Sister Harlindis' family joined in the celebration.*

# University Student Shares Insights on Monastic Life

Mary King left her home town of Lander, Wyo., to attend University of Mary in Bismarck, ND. She chose U-Mary because it is a Christian school, rooted in Benedictine values, and everyone on campus seemed so friendly and supportive. The community on and off campus seemed to be in sync with her own values.



Mary King

Mary met Sister Gerard Wald, a Benedictine Sister of Annunciation Monastery, who serves as freshman advocate at the University of Mary. "Sister Gerard was so kind, someone I could turn to when I was homesick," she explains. When Mary learned the sisters welcome the public to join them in daily praise, she asked Sister Gerard if she, a Methodist, could pray with the sisters. She has attended evening praise with the sisters ever since. "I was surprised by the way the Sisters welcomed me, they really cared about me and what was going on in my life," she says. "I've joined them for dinners and game nights, in fact, I consider them my home away from home."

Mary believes monastic life is a viable life option for women to consider for many reasons. Having considered becoming a nun herself, Mary says the structure of monastic life is very appealing. "There are so many people out there who are searching, wondering why the pieces of their lives aren't coming together. I think sometimes that missing piece is a strong faith life and following God's call."

She believes monastic life is a foothold that provides a firm foundation for one to become confident in their faith

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*"When I am in the presence of a sister, I see the loving qualities of Christ — a willingness to listen, to love and to serve."*

Mary King

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and servitude. "I see the rewards of monastic life as a constant progression of faith, inner peace and the security with the support of the community of sisters. When I am in the presence of a sister, I see the loving qualities of Christ — a willingness to listen, to love and to serve."

Jill Ackerman

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