



REDWOODS MONASTERY NEWSLETTER Winter 2019

Dear Friends of Redwoods Monastery:

This newsletter is an effort on our part to stay connected with you and to share with you the spirit of Redwoods, even when you are not physically present here. I hope you enjoy these thoughts and pictures and I invite you to let us know what you think of the newsletter. With prayerful wishes for peace, Sister Kathy DeVico.



Dear Friends,

By the time you receive our winter newsletter we will be on the threshold of Christmas, this event of God's incarnate gift given to us and for us. We celebrate the historical birth of Christ, but this is not all: we

celebrate the birth of Christ within our lives. We and our world need this birth of God's life and immense love. This Divine birth within the human soul will be the living source for all that we will choose and live in the New Year before us.

You will read in this newsletter the talk I gave to the community for the First Sunday of Advent. Sr. Suzanne offers a reflection on the icon she wrote for the community of New Clairvaux Abbey, "The Nativity of the Lord." You will enjoy reading Sr. Gertrude's piece on the new visitors from the 'animal kingdom' at the monastery! Also noteworthy is a short article about the participation of Sr. Suzanne and Sr. Ann Marie at the Anaheim Religious Conference for young Adults.

Please know of our gratitude for the spiritual and practical support we receive from you. You will be remembered in our prayer during this holy time and throughout the New Year.

Gratefully,

Sr. Kathy



Unexpected Visitor

***All you beasts, wild and tame, bless the Lord;
Praise and exalt Him above all forever." (Daniel 3:81)***

“Never could these words from the Book of the Prophet Daniel be more fitting for life at Redwoods these past months. In addition to our usual residents from the animal kingdom such as wild turkeys, ravens, spotted owls and other birds of the air, deer, and our beloved cat Boots, we had a herd of elk in our midst. First came the bull who, it seemed, found just the haven he was looking for. To the delight of some and the dismay of others, he then left only to return with his family in tow—16 of them! For about two weeks these awesome creatures feasted on apples and leaves in our cloister garden, grazed and lounged in the first field and marched themselves down the driveway like they owned the place. What several sisters observed was their care for our property. It was as if God was speaking to them along with Moses: “Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.” (Exodus 3:5) As seen in the photo, the bull managed to step over the fence without causing any

damage. And the majestic beasts did not go into our thriving vegetable garden; they only grazed outside the entrance, almost protecting it, even giving a fright to sisters who wanted to gather vegetables for dinner.

“Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord, praise and exalt Him above all forever.” (Daniel 3:57) ~ Sr. Gertrude



We too bless the Lord

Chapter Talk – *First Sunday of Advent – Sr. Kathy*

Vigilant and ready...to receive. God comes: “God is underway toward us” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Light of the Word*, p.13). Images, words straining to open our hearts to receive what awaits us during this Advent-Christmas season.

“We wait for the fullness. We watch for the completion of the promise. We vigil for the coming of the unimaginable fruition of the seed growing from the beginning in the heart of God” (p.16). With these stirring words of Wendy Wright from her book, *The Vigil*, we are given a window into the Advent-Christmas season.

In many ways this liturgical time is one of paradox. In the outer world about us it is known as a ‘busy’ time. Yet everything about the deeper meaning of what is waiting us is opposite of being busy and pre-occupied; like Martha in Luke’s gospel, ‘busy with so many things’ (Lk 10:41). Can we be occupied with the many things that demand our attention and still take time to enter into the deep silence, the silence which is the birthing ground for God’s promise of new life, the birth of Christ in the human soul.

With the First Sunday of Advent the horizon of God’s promise and the fulfillment of that promise at Christmas is drawn. We prepare to celebrate the historical birth of Jesus and we

prepare for the Christ life to be born again within us. We need this birth, each one of us, more than ever. It is a blessing to have the liturgical calendar with its daily readings to help us remember and to nurture our spiritual hunger, to point us to the ‘kairos’ moments where God will birth forth so simply and quietly within us and in our midst. Will we be vigilant and ready...to receive?

As I mentioned, the Advent-Christmas season places us at the center of spiritual paradox. In nature we are at the darkest time of the year. There is a deep silence in nature that we do not find in other seasons. And then there is the silent nature of our inner lives. There exists a darkness that opposes life, it can pull us into such depressive feelings as hopelessness, anxiety, meaninglessness. With God’s grace, which is never absent, we refuse to give this darkness power over our lives; we meet it with the anchor of faith and the trust in the ‘promise’ of salvation that is coming. Then there is another kind of ‘darkness’: John of the Cross names it ‘the dark night of the soul’. This dark night is different in that it is the fertile ground for new life. Here is how Meister Eckhart speaks about this darkness: “You cannot do better than to place yourself in darkness and unknowing” (*Sermons & Treatises*, vol. I, p.41). With our rational faculties and our need to control to be sure of outcomes, this is not an easy invitation to accept. However, Eckhart goes on to say: “But what is this darkness? What do you call it? What is its name? The only name it has is ‘potential receptivity’...” (p.41). To go into the silence, to be still and wait, yes, in darkness and unknowing. Here our faith is tested. We wait in darkness, “empty and bare,” in this climate of ‘potential receptivity’. Surrendering all and patiently waiting...God will not disappoint. In Eckhart’s words: “As for what profits you to pursue this possibility, to keep yourself empty and bare, just following and tracking this darkness and unknowing without turning back – it contains the chance to gain Him who is all things. And the more barren you are of self and unwitting of all things, the nearer you are to Him” (p.42).

Imagine what awaits: each one of us bearing the new Christ life together, with words of hope, with a presence of a true peace, with the birthing of a love that casts out all fear, living a love that forgives and heals, a love that is unconditional, expecting nothing in return, a love that loves because it has been graced with the gift, the gift of God’s beloved Son. God with us, breathing forth a life and a love stronger than the powers of death. Preparing the heart and soul to receive: the gift...the gift that is coming. Yes, He is coming, even in spite of ourselves and our wavering faith! Together we wait, together we hope, together we dwell in the darkness of ‘potential receptivity’.

The Icon of the Nativity of the Lord

Jesus, like every human being, had a gestation period. Though he was the Son of God, nine months in his mother's womb formed him to become who he already was. Similarly, icons have a gestation period. It took me almost two years to write the Nativity icon – the longest time I have spent working with any previous icon.

It was difficult. I can imagine Mary of Nazareth saying the same of her pregnancy.

There were major doubts. There were struggles. At times I totally disliked the direction I had taken. But some sort of faith and commitment forced me to follow through. Again – I can imagine St. Joseph or the Maji with similar feelings. The process of icon-writing and the icon's subject matter are mutually interdependent. They form a unity. Icons impact the writer and the viewer at a deep level.

The icon of the Nativity of the Lord is a festal icon. It is meant to be used in liturgical settings for the Christmas Season. Therefore, it is not tied to chronological time, but instead depicts many scenes simultaneously separated only by a highly stylized landscape and other elements that form a geometrical structure.

The central figure of this icon is Mary, the Mother of God. In Greek her title is Theotokos, which means God Bearer. She is seen reclining after giving birth. Her attention is focused on her husband, Joseph, who is receiving his own Annunciation of the divine origins of the Christ child from an "angel sent by God (Mat 1:20)." Mary, like Joseph, is pointing to Christ, the thematic center of the icon.

On the bottom right, we encounter two midwives from The

Protoevangelium of James. One is preparing to feed him while the other is drawing his bath. The presence of the midwives affirm that Jesus was fully human with all the dependencies of a newborn infant. Though the source of this scene is apocryphal and steeped in legend, the women offer a tender and human nuance to the Gospel narratives.

To the left of Mary are the Maji, bearing gifts and to the right is a Shepherd with his sheep. He is blowing a shofar to announce the Divine Birth. Arching over the central figures stretches a band of angels. In the center of this band is a

semicircle that represents the Trinity. The different shades of blue within the semicircle signify the Divine Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Proceeding from this Godhead is the Star of Bethlehem that at once proclaims Christ's birth and his divine origin.

Along with the joy of the birth of the Messiah, the icon foreshadows many elements of Jesus' public life and eventual passion, death and resurrection. According to scripture, Jesus was born and laid in a manger (Luke 2:7). However, in this icon, Jesus is born in a cave and the manger is a rock hewn tomb. The cave indicates human struggles with evil or doubt. The tomb reminds us that only through death could Christ resurrect and become food for all living beings. Similarly, the bath and midwives prefigure

Christ's baptism and his eventual triumph over chaos and the underworld.

The Birth of Christ, whether written in Gospels, apocryphal texts, icons or one's own experience, announces the "Glad tidings of great joy (Luke 2:10)," but always against the backdrop of struggle and contradiction. Through these trials our hearts are enlightened and expanded so that with Mary of Nazareth, we may also be God Bearers for one another.

Sr. Suzanne





Welcome Center Entrance



Gift Shop

Religious Education Congress

In order to promote vocations and increase awareness of Cistercian/Trappist monastic life, Redwoods Abbey, along with the Abbey of New Clairvaux in Vina, CA participated in this year's Religious Education Congress sponsored by the Diocese of LA and held at the Anaheim Convention Center. The Congress offered more than 300 workshops and welcomed over 40,000 attendees during a three-day period. Various liturgies, both Eucharistic and from the Divine Office, were celebrated throughout the days from many different traditions and styles of prayer. This is the single largest gathering of this kind in the United States and provided a great venue for connecting to young people, their teachers and catechists, and other Church groups and organizations.

In 2020, we will again have a booth! You will find us listed in the program book as Trappist West: Monks and Nuns, booth 748 and 750. The dates for 2020 Congress are February 21-23.

We are excited to be able to present Benedictine monasticism, contemplative practice, and Redwoods Monastery to a such large audience. Many US Catholics have never been to a monastery or been able to experience the silence, simplicity and prayerfulness of our manner of life. We hope to encourage young people either directly or through their



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catechists, to visit our abbeys and attend vocation discernment weekends. Redwoods will be offering discernment opportunities for women, our Monastic Experience Weekends, April 23 -26 and October 1-4, 2020.

Please join us in spreading the word about Cistercian Life at Redwoods Abbey and encouraging young women who may be interested in joining us for a Monastic Experience Weekend.



The sense of a Universal Church is the greatest experience of the Religious Education Congress. Here are Sr. Ann Marie and Fr. Guerric with a Nigerian Representative holding a poster of St. Cyrian Tanzi, a Trappist Monk and popular Nigerian saint.