



Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey
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Phone: (563) 582-2595
E-mail: kathleen@mississippiabbey.org
Website: mississippiabbey.org
Candy phone: 1-563-556-6330
Candy website: monasterycandy.com



Christmas Day — much joy! Srs Gemmaa, Suz, Chris, Rebecca, and Michele with guest Ree.

Easter Greetings from Mississippi Abbey! And what a rare Lent we have had - entirely in winter. Which in many ways was a great blessing, with the cold and dark drawing us inside ourselves to be silently with Jesus in his time of suffering and death. So now we are enjoying the signs of spring as we celebrate his rising to a new and unimaginable life.

2008 is for us a year of jubilees. For our relatively small community, many years we haven't a single sister celebrating a jubilee. This year, we have FIVE! We count our anniversary from the date of our first vows. Our Sisters Kathleen and Louise have now been professed 25 years, and Sisters Gail, Carol, and Lillian 50. As our guest space is limited, we can have only one or two sisters' families at a time. So we will have a couple of celebrations in May for the Silver folks, and then a Big Splash in August for our Golden sisters.

Sr Kathleen O'Neill, a New Jersey native, describes her call from Jesus as a "Damascus experience": "A few years after college I had the wonderful experience of finding the 'right person,' and of loving and being loved. I will always be grateful to the young man who became my fiancé for his gift of love, which woke something in

my heart and freed me to welcome a still greater love."

As she prepared for marriage, Kathleen spent Lent fasting, attending daily Mass, and reading St Augustine's Confessions. "I reached the point where Augustine has come to believe deeply in Christ but can't bring himself to change his life accordingly. The chapter ends, 'I had found the pearl of great price, but still I held back..' Right away I knew - 'that's me!'" Everything she thought she wanted in life lay before her, and suddenly it was not enough. She felt an overpowering desire to give her life completely to God, in the monastery. Of course, sharing this with her fiancé and with parents and friends was not easy. But as she was certain this was God's work, she was also confident he would take care of her fiancé. "God doesn't do something wonderful for one person at another person's expense. If this was right for me, it had to be right for my boyfriend, too. And he was beautiful about it - very sad, even in tears - but never once angry or blaming. I am still so grateful for his graciousness and love."

Mississippi Abbey was the first monastery Kathleen visited. An earlier love for St Bernard convinced her even before coming here that this would be the place,



Sr Kathleen at the organ.

and she entered in July, 1979, making her first profession on the feast of the Baptism of Christ in January 1983. Not that her life here has been completely smooth - "I hold the community record for length of time between entering and first profession," she says. A music major, Sr Kathleen has been our principal organist for over 25 years, was in charge of the capital campaign we ran from 1999 - 2004, and at present serves as prioress and junior director.

Our newsletter of April 2002 gave the news that Sr Louise Burnard had transferred her stability to Mississippi Abbey on March 25. In most years that is the feast of the Annunciation, when we celebrate Mary's obedient "yes" to God. Louise's "yes" to God goes back a long way. She entered the Grand Rapids Dominicans when she was only 14 and continued there through final profession. Her congregation sent her to Worcester Massachusetts to study for a doctorate in geography, and while she was there the Lord spoke to her in a new way. A visit to the Benedictine monks of Weston Priory, Vermont left her shaken to her core, so moved was she by the deep sense of prayer, of community, and of open hospitality.

In dialogue with her Dominican superiors, in 1978 Sr Louise joined a small experimental monastery in the Adirondacks (NY state), where (among other things) she began to learn carpentry - one of her many practical skills. Nine months later the tiny community folded, and in January 1980 Sr Louise entered Our Lady of the Redwoods in Whitethorn, California. She made her solemn profession as a Cistercian nun on the feast of the



Sr Louise Burnard

Annunciation, 1987. At present she serves as our cellarer, which means she is in charge of all the buildings and their maintenance, one of the biggest jobs in any monastery.

This December brought us another milestone anniversary: the 10th anniversary of the first group of our Associates making commitments. In 1997 the concept of commitment to the AIC (Associates of the Iowa Cistercians) was a new one, although since then it has become the norm. On January 12 two of our newer members, having completed the formation program, made their first commitments, while those who made their commitment last year, and the original group from 1997, renewed theirs. We are delighted to note that all three pioneers are still with us.

November, on the other hand, brought us a sad loss, when our sister Emma Cazabonne asked for and was granted a dispensation from her vows as a Cistercian. Sr Emma, formerly a member of our monastery of Igny in France, transferred her stability to Mississippi in March, 2005. She left our community last August and pursued all the proper channels to receive her dispensation. We miss her very much and wish her many blessings as she seeks to follow Christ in new ways.

In order to balance all the jubilee festivity with our vocation to silence and solitude, we reluctantly decided this year to forego our annual fundraising dinner, which we and so many friends have enjoyed the last few years.



Elisabeth Swanson, Connie May, and Teresa McMahon renew their commitment in New Melleray's church, after 10 years as Associates of our 2 Monasteries.

But we close with happy news of new life - and another potential jubilee. Our Sr Michele Armstrong pronounced her first vows on Feb 2, the feast of the Presentation. If she perseveres in her monastic life, and if any of this year's Golden Jubilarians are still in this life 25 years from now, in 2033 we will celebrate 25, 50 and 75-year anniversaries in the same year!

Wishing you joy in the Risen Savior -

The sisters of Mississippi Abbey

Excerpt from Sr Kathleen's Chapter talk on the feast of the Baptism of Jesus, January 2008

I don't think it's too fanciful to suppose that the accounts of Jesus' baptism give us a precious glimpse of a moment that was central to his understanding of himself and his mission. Perhaps when he left Galilee to follow the crowds to the Jordan he had no idea of his own mission. How his divine nature affected his human nature and his understanding of his relation to the Father will always remain a mystery too great for words. No doubt there was always in his heart some kind of amazing awareness of God's love for him. But as a human being he also needed to grow in understanding of his purpose in life.

So we have Jesus, the sinless one, filled with desire to be baptized - that is already a great mystery. He is tremendously attracted to the Baptist movement, a movement of repentance and renewal. And then, when he in his humility goes down into the water, he receives an astounding gift, a gift that will change his life and change all our lives.

Part of my love of this story comes from my own vocation experience, which was above all an experience of being overwhelmed by God's love. I love to see this story



Sr Michele, newly professed, greets her aunt, our Sr Joan.



In March our friend Bill Witt gave a photography workshop to several of us. Srs Grace and Suz experiment in our Mint Room at candy.

of Jesus' baptism as the story of his vocation, to imagine him, at this moment, being overwhelmed with the Father's love. Surely he was indeed filled with love at this moment in a way beyond anything we experience, because only a heart as large and open as that of Jesus could be filled so greatly.

So overwhelming is the experience that Jesus needs 40 days of intense solitude in the desert to reflect on it. His future, his life, his death, all that will be asked of him, are somehow implicit in his going down into the water, coming up, and hearing the Father's words of love and election, in the presence of the Holy Spirit of them both. He is God's beloved Son, and as such he is the voice and presence of the Father to the broken world, charged with bringing the Father's love into its fullest working out in human history.

Jesus' own great wish for us is that we might share this experience with him. He gives us this feast so that we can be present, can go down into the waters with him, can share in his bliss at a love so great and so transforming. And we too can ask that this love will change not only our own little lives, but the life of the world.