



Orval, Belgium, home of Bishop Van Hecke



Mt St Bernard, England, home of Bishop Varden

“The Holy Father has appointed as bishop-prelate of Trondheim, Norway, the Reverend Fr. Erik Varden, currently abbot of Mount Saint Bernard Abbey, Leicestershire, England. Together with the brothers of Mount Saint Bernard we thank Dom Erik for his services as Abbot of the community and for his service to the Order. And, while we cannot but feel a sense of loss, we believe that in his “Yes” to the “Holy Will of God” there will be blessing not only for Dom Erik and his flock in Norway but also for Mount Saint Bernard Abbey and the Order. For in His will is our peace, joy and true freedom.”

As Church attendance dwindles in many countries, so do vocations to our monasteries. In 2020 three of our monasteries were closed: Prairies (monks, Canada); Chambarand (nuns, France) and Désert (monks, France). The latter was in some ways especially sad for us, as it was the home of Bl Joseph Cassant, a young monk who died in 1903 and was beatified in 2004. But – we are also thrilled to tell you that our sisters of Vitorchiano, Italy, began a new foundation in Portugal in December.



Vitorchiano's church

As for the Covid, most of our monasteries around the world have closed guest houses and gift shops. Contagious diseases spread like wildfire in a monastery – and all our monasteries in the First World have large populations of vulnerable seniors. We are aware of three houses which had severe outbreaks, one each in Austria (1 death), France, and Italy. The house in Italy was Vitorchiano, but it doesn't seem to have stopped them from making their latest foundation! Like Désert, Vitorchiano also had a young member beatified, Bl Gabriella Sagheddu (d. 1939, beatified 1983). Since 1968 this extraordinary monastery has founded no fewer than 8 new monasteries in as many different countries: Italy, Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, Indonesia, Philippines, Czech Republic, and now Portugal. Some of these now have new daughter houses of their own – in Angola, Nicaragua, Brazil...

Whatever your experience during this pandemic, we wish you much joy and peace in Christ, the source of our joy and peace. God bless you!

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Easter Greetings! We are happy to tell you all the sisters are well. And of course, the Big Question of the day: yes, we have all received our 2nd vaccination – on St Patrick's day. We got the Pfizer vaccine, and our pharmacy (only 15 minutes away) sent out pharmacists to vaccinate all the sisters and those of our few employees who wished to be vaccinated. So by the middle of Holy Week our vaccines were at full effect – and we celebrated this on Holy Thursday by returning to receiving Communion under both species. What a blessing to receive the Blood of Jesus on that very day when we enter so deeply into his passion! Unfortunately, for the few guests who come to our guest chapel, we still are limited to giving only the hosts. That's the protocol in the Church and it certainly makes good sense.

Many years ago we would have a “para-liturgy” on Holy Thursday morning, a time of community sharing and mutual forgiveness. By the late 1980's this had evolved into a communal participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Three of the priests of New Melleray come, and we all gather in the back of Church. A litany is read, and then each sister can mention some of the ways she sins against the community, and ask forgiveness – and generally every sister does mention something. It is always very moving to hear our sisters humbly ask pardon for the faults that cause us pain – and to know that each is well aware of how we hurt others, and truly desiring to do better, with God's help.



Bill Witt



Bill Witt

Then, in accordance with the Church's norms for Communal Penance services, the priests move up to stations in the sanctuary and sisters go up one by one for short private confessions and absolution. We conclude with the Lord's Prayer and the sign of peace. It is an amazingly beautiful way to begin the Triduum, for our whole community to be at peace and full fellowship, and our hearts prepared to enter the celebration of the Lord's passion and resurrection.

We all remember only too well the state of affairs last spring, when the pandemic was getting well under way and we were all facing tremendous unknowns – and fears. Since individual confession was largely out of the question, the Church allowed for general absolution – and last year, that's what we did at our Holy Thursday service. BUT – this year, even though that permission still stands, we returned to the fuller practice of including private confessions. We even exchanged the Sign of Peace in community for the first time in over a year. For now this was a one-time experience; we will wait until we can give a sign of peace to our guests, before reinstating it at our Eucharist.

In our last newsletter we mentioned that we've taken down several buildings on our property. This was part of a larger project to re-organize some of our overall setup. Back in 2002 we built our new "candy house," and shortly after that converted the old candy house into a welcome center and lots of much-needed office space – and renamed the whole "St Benedict's



The "unfinished space" (now partly finished) seen from outside door. Opening of "tunnel" to our basement visible back right.

Welcome Center." However, while the office space is beautiful, it's a few hundred feet from the main building, and the road in between is often icy and treacherous in the winter. Not great for sisters in their 70's or 80's – or indeed, for any of us.

So we have come up with a plan to re-organize some spaces in the main monastery, and even to open up some new space. The ground level of the dormitory wing we built in 1979 included some unfinished space accessible only from outdoors. For years we used it for kitchen storage (that's how one of our sister cooks broke her ankle: fetching supplies in icy weather), until the construction of our senior wing in 2009 gave us room for a large indoor pantry. Since then, the old space has been unused (more accurately, collecting junk). Well, we have now built a tunnel to get to this unfinished space from inside, and are sprucing it up for various uses. Along with some other re-arranging, this will allow us to move the offices at St Ben's over to the main house.



Don't forget to check out our video series: link can be found at mississippiabbey.org.



Lots of ice this February!



Our plans include making a space where a sister can visit with a guest without going outside in the ice, and centralizing offices and printers. All of this involves knocking down small walls in various parts of the house, putting in better sound-proofing, even some re-wiring; and before construction even started, nearly 2 years of community dialogues and designing. We decided to minimize the time of disruption by doing all these relatively small projects in three parts of the monastery simultaneously – which means there's not much escape! The main work started in March and we hope will be over by the end of May. In any case, we should be able to regale you with exciting pictures of new or improved offices in our next newsletter (just kidding about the "exciting" part).

But speaking of exciting, we do have two pieces of exciting news. On the earthly, mundane level, after nearly 10 years of intermittent labor and figuring and experimenting and rebuilding and trials on a second caramel wrapper which we bought used, WE FINALLY HAVE IT WORKING!

Almost 60% by weight of the candy we sell goes through the wrapping machine. The company that makes our type of machine went out of business decades ago, and there is nothing comparable being made by anyone else. Our wrapper wraps 180 caramels in a minute – that's 3 per second. And it's a highly complex machine, made back in the 1930's, which needs skilled and frequent adjusting, and can be out of commission for days, or even weeks. Having so much of our income dependent on one rather fragile machine has been a source of concern – all the more so as our abbess is our primary Wrapper Fixer, and it can be a serious drain on her time. So finally having a second functioning machine is a huge blessing. We were even able to send our regular wrapper to machine hospital and rely on the "new" one for several months.

Our other piece of news is on a different level, and for us, even more exciting. On Mercy Sunday our Sr Madeleine pronounced her first vows, and received the black scapular. The Octave of Easter is always a time of special joy, and for all of us that joy was greatly heightened by witnessing one of our young sisters vow herself to Jesus in the Cistercian way of life.



M. Rebecca clothes Sr Madeleine in the black scapular and belt

NEWS FROM OUR ORDER

In the past two years, the Holy See has appointed two abbots of our Order as bishops: Dom Lode Van Hecke is now the bishop of Ghent; and Dom Erik Varden is now the bishop prelate of Trondheim – which means he is now the bishop of our sisters in Tautra!

Before he was elected abbot, Fr Lode, as secretary to our Abbot General Dom Bernardo Olivera, accompanied him on a 4-day visit to us in 2004. As for Bishop Varden, he is Norwegian by birth, and many of us have met him also. We are very happy for both bishops and their dioceses! But abbots, like bishops, are not easy to come by, so our Order feels the loss keenly. In the following communications this is especially evident when the second abbot was taken from us:

"The Abbot General and the Council, on behalf of the Order, offer our sincere congratulations to Dom Lode on his nomination. We assure him of our prayers as he takes up this new ministry for the people of the diocese of Ghent and for the Church in Belgium. And we hope that his availability to the service of the Church will also be a special source of blessing for the community in Orval [his monastery] and for our Order."