

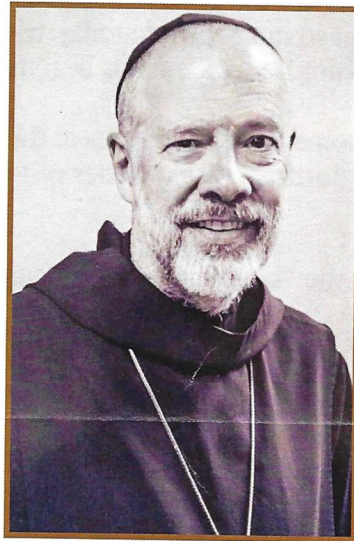


## RULE OF LIFE

I was born in Portland, Oregon, at the end of 1952, which meant growing up in the 1950s and 60s.

Apart from television and an occasional movie at the theater, and even rarer attendance at a concert (the Beatles performed in Portland in August of 1965), we youngsters pretty much had to invent our own entertainment.

At one point we produced an occasional, though rather sparse, "newspaper," called "Neighborhood News," typed up by an older sister of one of our playmates. We also put on occasional plays which our parents were obliged to attend. One year we set up a "science museum" in the basement of the home of one of our playmates. I can't recall who actually came to see the "museum," except we who had set it up. The parents didn't seem interested.



Of course, there was no internet in those days, and the single phone in the house was a "party-line," so we had to wait our turn to make a call.

Things were simpler then, of course, and in some ways demanded more creativity, "*esprit de corps*," than might be found today growing up in America.

In those days there were clear guidelines and rules within our families, regarding, firstly, attendance at school, doing homework, family meals, curfew in the evenings, lights out, etc. All of this might be thought of as a "rule of life," which varied from household to household, but which had common elements nonetheless.

In the Benedictine tradition to which I have belonged for the past fifty-five years, there is a saying I heard at the outset of my monastic "career," namely, "keep the Rule and the Rule will keep you." Like most everyone else on planet earth, monks and non-monks alike, live with some amount of structure, for work,

study, worship, leisure, rest and many other activities. Simply "showing up" and "going through the motions" of these activities is never enough.

We are all called to be more than physically present to what we are doing, cultivating what has been called by Christian authors, "the sacrament of the present moment."

Since the past is over (as enjoyable as growing up might have been), and we cannot predict the future with any accuracy, all we really have is the "here and now" (*hic et nunc* in Latin), and the question remains: how will I use my time?

Saint Benedict in his Rule for Monks emphasizes the importance of our minds being in harmony with our

voices when we chant the Divine Office, the "Liturgy of the Hours." The point is well taken (ask anyone who has prayed or does pray the Liturgy of the Hours), and the concept can easily be applied to anyone's daily life.

We might ask ourselves: do I readily give my all to whatever I am asked or required to do in my state in life? Am I truly present and listening to those with whom I live, work, study, assist, raise, etc., on a daily basis?

We can only answer for ourselves, of course, and can never say to others: if only you would change, I could be a better person. We can only be better persons by the choices we make, the words we speak and the thoughts we cultivate.

Hopefully, we all want to be better persons, who are present to God, to one another and even to ourselves, living in the present moment and not living in the past nor in the future.

Christian authors of the past have written about the idea of “abandonment to Divine Providence,” which means, in essence, “letting go and letting God.” Our culture teaches us to be highly independent, self-sufficient and competitive; concepts such as working with others, giving and taking, compliance, etc., can be foreign to many today.

In our Benedictine Rule, though, self-abandonment to and acceptance of God’s providence is an invitation at every moment of life, something crucial for living in the presence of the One who desires to show us “the path of life,” as Saint Benedict expresses our going to God.

Saint Benedict is also clear that the basic “rule of life” is the Gospel itself, which contains the teaching, mission, miracles and example of Jesus Christ, who said: “I came that all may have life and have it abundantly” (Gospel of John, chapter 10, verse 10).

Hallmarks of the Benedictine way are moderation, balance, simplicity of life, restraint of speech, allowing personal ambition and careerism to be set aside for the good of others and for the good of the community, the family, the parish, etc. It is no surprise that so many people today who are not monks are attracted to the principles and teachings contained in the Rule of Saint Benedict. It has become a guide for unknown numbers today.

This Newsletter is a chance for us to share some of our activities at this time, as sons of Saint Benedict, who desires that “in all things God may be glorified” (First Letter of Saint Peter 4:11; also, Rule of Saint Benedict, Chapter 57:9).

It can even be said that the “business” of a monastery is to glorify God.

May it be so for all of us in our daily doings.

Abbot Christian Leisy, OSB

*Abbot Christian Leisy, OSB*



OUR FOUNDER FATHER AELRED, FLANKED BY CHURCH ARCHITECT GEORGE NAKASHIMA  
AND ARTIST-NEIGHBOR GEORGIA O'KEEFE, CIRCA 1966.

# PAPAL VISIT

BY FATHER GREGORIO



POPE LEO XIV GREETs FATHER GREGORIO

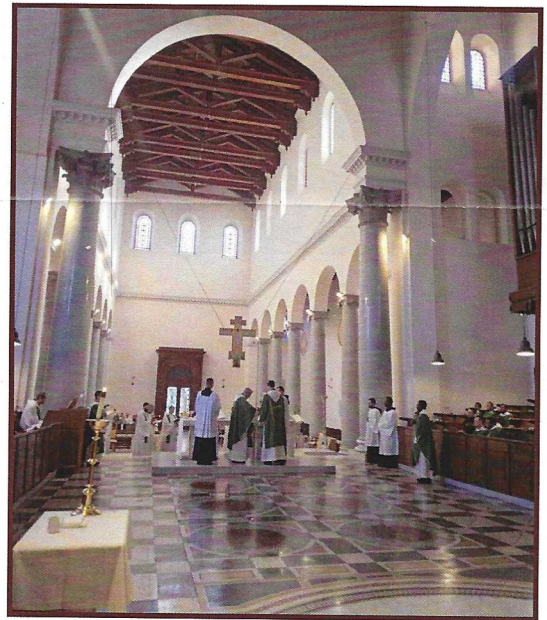
I will complete formal studies in Rome in February of 2027, and will continue monastic life both at Christ in the Desert and at our dependent Monastery of Saint Mary and All the Saints (Santa Maria y Todos Los Santos) near Veracruz, Mexico.

I have benefitted immensely from my studies in Rome, where I also serve on the Council of the Abbot President of our international Subiaco Cassinese Congregation, based at Sant' Ambrogio, not far from Sant' Anselmo.

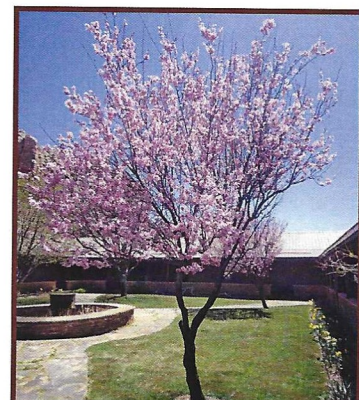
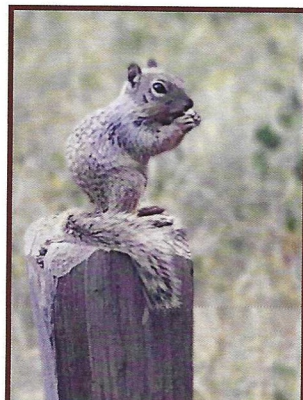
I look forward to returning to North America next year! ☩

On November 11, 2025, Pope Leo XIV visited the Primatial Benedictine Abbey and Pontifical University of Sant' Anselmo in Rome, where I live and continue studies in Sacramental Theology. The pope came for an evening Mass and personally greeted all the monks and professors at Saint' Anselmo after the Mass (over a hundred people!).

Serendipitously, it was Pope Leo XIII who began Sant' Anselmo as the world-wide Benedictine headquarters in Rome in 1887. Perhaps our present pope took that into account by visiting Sant' Anselmo so early in his pontificate. In any case, the "*anselmiani*," as we are called in Rome, were honored and delighted with the visit of the pope.



INSIDE THE CHURCH AT SANT' ANSELMO



# 2025 MONASTIC RETREAT

BY ABBOT CHRISTIAN



ABBOT CHRISTIAN AND ABBOT ELIJAH OWENS

Even monks “go on retreat,” an annual week of greater silence, solitude, prayer and rest. We do it at the monastery itself, not somewhere else, and it is typically a pleasant and enjoyable time for the monastic community.

Last November we were privileged to have Abbot Elijah Owens, OSB, monk and abbot of Subiaco Abbey in Arkansas, as our retreat-giver. He is a dynamic speaker and no one came late to his twice-daily conferences(!), each lasting about half an hour.

Abbot Elijah’s theme for the retreat conferences flowed from a saying of the famous 11th century Abbot, Saint Hugh of Cluny in France: “For it is the light of Christ we seek, the likeness of Christ we become, and the peace of Christ we share,” which Abbot Elijah abbreviated as: Seek, Be and Share.

In his introduction to the retreat, Abbot Elijah let us know that, “We will enter these days of retreat not to

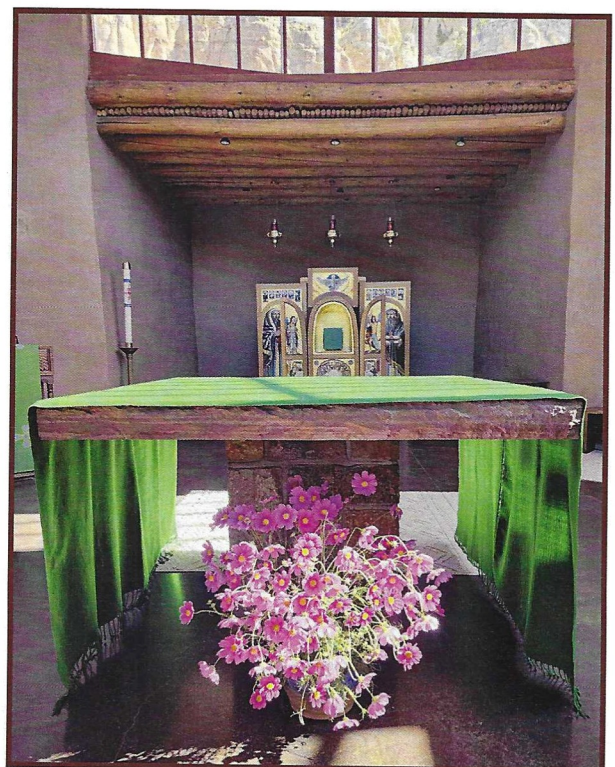
escape the monastic life that God has given us, but to look at it anew in the light of Christ.”

When all is said and done, Abbot Elijah wanted us to be evermore ready to say with Saint Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Letter to the Galatians, chapter 2, verse 20).

Outside of the daily conferences during retreat week, we carried on with the monastic *horarium* (schedule), praying the Divine Office, celebrating the Conventual Mass, and engaged in some amount of work, to keep the house running, especially cooking, some office work, care of our animals (sheep, donkey and chickens) and tending the Giftshop in the mornings. Otherwise, there was time and space for reading, reflecting and praying.

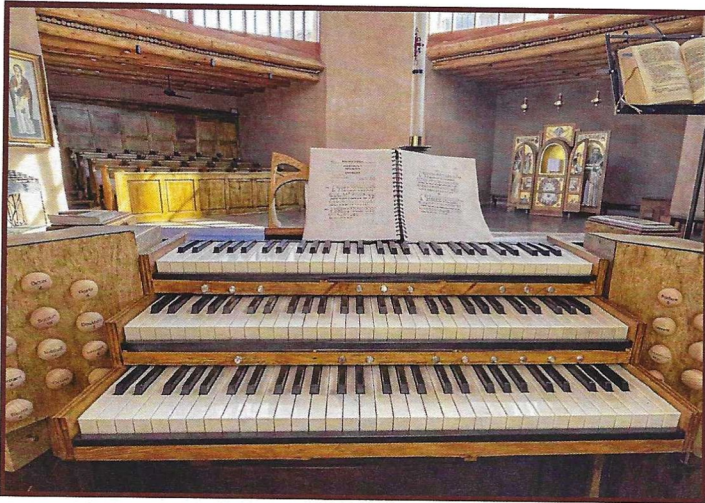
Abbot Elijah also gave a homily each day at Mass while he was here, based on the Gospel of the day, and applying it to our monastic journey in the desert.

We are very grateful to Abbot Elijah for his inspiring conferences and edifying presence during our 2025 monastic retreat. ✠



# AN ORGAN FOR OUR CHURCH

BY BARBARA GOLDER, MD, JD



What inspires a monk to build an organ from scratch - especially a very unconventional one?

Perhaps like most other things in the monastery, it was the needs of communal life. Brother David Bryant puts it this way: “For many years the only instrument in our church was a Yamaha ELB-02. After I became choir-master, it began to feel like the right time to move toward something more fitting for our community.”

Pipe organs are indeed prodigious instruments, requiring so much space that often, churches are designed around them. Although the console isn’t terribly large, the ranks of pipes take up an enormous amount of space and must be placed and voiced properly for the instrument to sound as it should. The church at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert is a small, minimalist space with little room to accommodate the traditional form of pipe organ. With prices of even used instruments often exceeding \$50,000 to upwards of \$100,000, stewardship of money as well as space demanded a different solution.

Organs are important to Catholic, monastic, worship. “Sacrosanctum Concilium” teaches that organ music has pride of place in worship in part because, unlike the piano, which is a percussive instrument, the organ gets its unique tone and tenor from the passage of air, which allows a more sustained sound that blends easily and well with the human voice, given that it too comes from modulation of air. Add to that the symbolism of breath and air in Catholic thought and piety (after all, man received life from the breath of God) and it’s understandable why procuring an organ suitable for praying seven

times a day in the monastery church became a priority.

The hybrid organ Brother David created combines the traditional wind-blown organ pipe with digital sampling technology. Some of the sounds come from the pipes; others are from exceptionally high-quality digital recordings played through speakers placed to optimize the blending of sounds and to provide an experience very much like a traditional pipe organ.

One of the greater challenges in creating the organ was a lack of precedents. Most people build either electronic or traditional organs. Much of the technology and the technique involved in building this organ was acquired by trial and error, a process Brother David describes as “quietly joyful.” The digital side of the organ was the simpler part to bring to life. The console, manuals and wooden parts took more time and exacting work to very tight specifications. Along with those came a variety of new skills: 3D graphing, with high precision, computer driven machine tools such as drills, lathes, mills, and routers. Because the monastery is remote and there really is not a “hybrid organ building” community to turn to for help, internet research and trial and error became the order of the day.

In the end, something unique in the world of organs has emerged in the quiet solitude of the monastery. It’s not unreasonable to hope that the hard-won knowledge of how to build a hybrid organ, whose sound and voice more closely resemble the traditional pipe organ than does the all-electronic console organ, will permit other congregations, parochial and monastic, to enjoy the beauty of organ music as it was written. Theologians and composers alike understood the intimate beauty of a choir singing with an organ.

The first day the organ was installed as a work in progress and used in worship, Brother David recounts, “people were looking around, trying to find where the sound was coming from, searching for pipes I had not yet finished setting up (at that time, only the digital portion was working). Then, that first Christmas, when I played the bells from the console, the whole church seemed light with joy.” ✠

(For more information on the building of the organ, its updating and for the chance to listen to it, please see the link and QR code attached below.)



<https://thedesertmonkbrdavid.wordpress.com/2026/02/17/organ-build-notes-and-photos/>

# BOOKS RECENTLY READ AT TABLE

BY ABBOT CHRISTIAN

Each day at our midday “main” meal, after opening prayers, we listen to a portion of Scripture (the Bible), then, while we eat, we listen to a book, from cover to cover, several pages each day.

Each week a monk is assigned as “Table Reader,” and he becomes our “eyes and voice” for enlightenment and even entertainment at what we listen to.

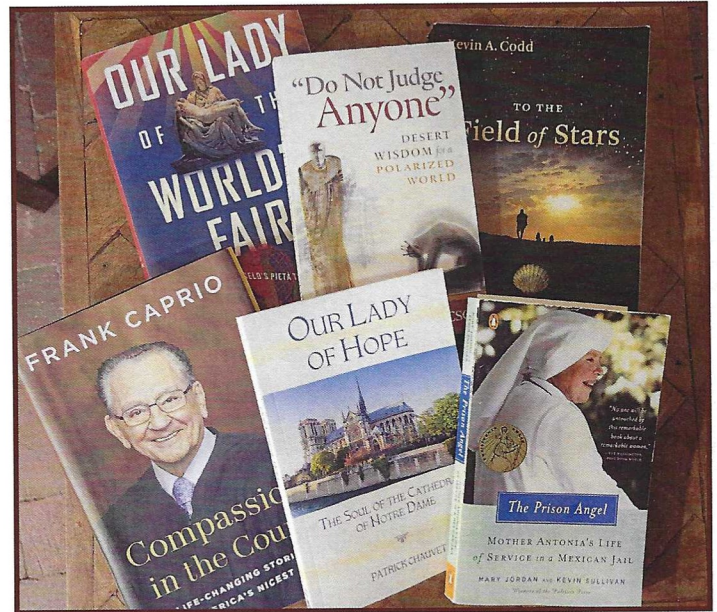
Some of the books we have listened to and enjoyed over the past months include:

“Our Lady of the World’s Fair: Bringing Michelangelo’s Pieta to Queens (New York) in 1964,” by Ruth D. Nelson, published in 2024. For baby-boomers, a walk down Memory Lane.

“Do Not Judge Anyone: Desert Wisdom for a Polarized World,” by Father Isaac Slater, Trappist monk, published in 2023. Something we all need to hear, monk or not.

“To the Field of Stars: A Pilgrim’s Journey to Santiago de Compostela,” by Father Kevin A. Codd, published in 2008. We’ve read this one twice in the past eighteen years!

“Compassion in the Court: Life-Changing Stories from America’s Nicest Judge,” by the late Frank Caprio, published in 2025. Inspiration from the face of compassionate justice.



BOOKS ARE DEPICTED IN THE ABOVE PHOTOGRAPH

“Our Lady of Hope: The Soul of the Cathedral of Notre Dame,” by Msgr. Patrick Chauvet, published in 2021. Written before the horrific fire of April 15, 2019, but completely informative and germane nonetheless.

“The Prison Angel: Mother Antonia’s Life of Service in a Mexican Jail,” by Mary Jordan and Kevin Sullivan, published in 2005.

Jaw-dropping. Before becoming a monk, one of our brothers worked with Mother Antonia for many years. He concurs with the stories contained in the book!

Happy reading! ✂



# EDITORIAL: “THE CHOSEN” AND “HOUSE OF DAVID”

“Have the monks seen *The Chosen*? What do you think of it?” We’ve been asked that question any number of times over the past several years. For those who don’t know, the question refers to a multi-season television series produced by Angel Studios, on the public life and ministry of Jesus, culminating in his passion, death and resurrection.

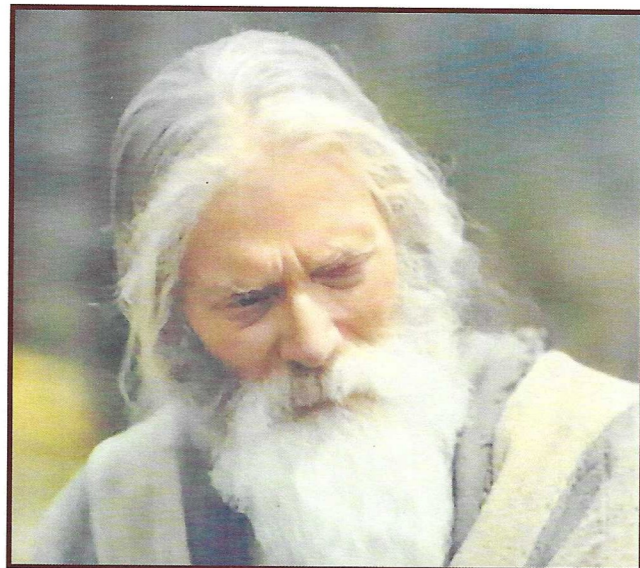
*The Chosen* has had very broad appeal across all denominations and has become a worldwide phenomenon, introducing many people to the stories of the Gospel accounts for the first time. And yes, we have seen it. When a new season comes out we watch an episode in our weekly evening “community class.” Overall, the series has been most enjoyable.

Did Saint Thomas the Apostle really have a fiancée named Ramah? Was the Apostle Simon the Zealot actually a martial arts expert? Was Saint Matthew autistic? All kinds of questions like this come up when people watch *The Chosen* who may be unfamiliar with the actual written Gospel accounts. The writers of *The Chosen* are trying to preach the Gospel and introduce people to Jesus using a video format, taking artistic liberties on a regular basis.

The producers of the series are certainly seeking to be faithful to the biblical accounts, but of course, they are producing a television series and quite naturally add in all sorts of fictional characters and dialogue to “flesh out” the storyline. Some of it may seem unnecessary and even silly at times, but overall they’ve done their homework, and there are wonderful historical, cultural and archaeological facts sprinkled throughout the episodes.

If we had to offer any caution it would be to say that *The Chosen* should definitely not be used as a substitute for catechesis (for teaching the Faith). We receive the Faith not from a television series, but from the Church, from the Scriptures, the Church’s tradition and the Magisterium.

All that said, *The Chosen* can be an excellent tool for meditation. For example, one can focus on the person of Jesus, particularly his encounters with individuals: the clarity and warmth of his night time discussion with Nicodemus about the need to be “born again”



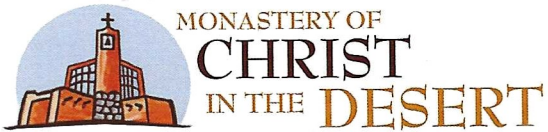
PROPHET SAMUEL FROM “HOUSE OF DAVID”

(see Gospel of Saint John, chapter 3); his gently coaxing forth the faith of the Samaritan woman at the well (John, chapter 4); his tenderness and compassion in healing the leper or the paralytic let down through the roof (Gospel of Saint Luke, chapter 5, verses 12-26).

All of these encounters of individuals with Jesus can be food for meditation and a means for an encounter with him as well. But, of course, we need to read the Gospels to get the real story!

Much the same thing could be said about the other series we have watched, *House of David*, put out by Amazon Prime Video. Is it biblically accurate in every detail? Certainly not. The writers are using the biblical accounts and characters to tell the story and then making use of dramatic license (liberally at times), adding dialogue and fictional characters to flesh out the story.

The favorite character in *House of David* around the Monastery seems to be the prophet Samuel. Consecrated to God from his earliest childhood, Samuel is at once a man completely suffused with the Divine and fiercely dedicated to his mission. At the same time, his joyful, humble humanity and love for God’s people continually shines through. A wonderful example for all of us. Make it so, Lord! ✠



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## ANNIVERSARY

This year on June 24th, the Solemnity of the Birth of Saint John the Baptist, the Monastery of Christ in the Desert celebrates sixty-two years of existence. The number is not celebratory, like 50, 75 or 100 years, but we will rejoice nonetheless for the past six-plus decades of the life of prayer and work at this Monastery in the Chama Canyon wilderness.

No special events are planned for June 24th, though we will celebrate a solemn Mass on that day, to thank God for the presence of the Monastery in this beautiful place, and to remember the many who have come and gone over the years, both as members of this community, as well as the many guests and visitors.

We will also remember those who have gone before us and are now enjoying the rewards of everlasting life, most especially our founder and first Prior, Father Aelred Wall. May they rest in peace and rise in glory!

A special thanks to all who have in the past and those who now support us on our pilgrim journey at this Monastery of Christ in the Desert. Ad multos annos! ☩