

When I took the whole summer to say goodbye to my beloved parishioners in a northeast Philadelphia church three years ago, I had time for good, leisurely conversations over numerous dinner tables and found myself being gently challenged on my decision to stop being a rector and go live in a convent and become a nun.

“Why do you want to be demoted? How can you stop being a priest? Don’t give up, you might meet a man. Maybe you would like to meet the new rector at the church a half mile away? He’s divorced.” One vestry member, my 80-year-old treasurer, said, “You are going there to lick your wounds.” OUCH! But nothing they said could dissuade me. Yet, their words are still with me, part of all I am working to sort out in the switch from rector to monastic.

It is true, I have felt demoted at times. Like when I arrived in my first community and was introduced as “our latest postulant” to a male school principal. Without warning, I felt faint with confusion and shame-faced, like an inept accomplice in a huge fraud. Inside me a voice was yelling, “No, no, I’m the reverend. I’m the rector!”

Seems that on the surface I was excited to come to monastic life and willing to assume the identity of “postulant,” but the deep regions of my



From Rector...to...Monastic

by Sister Sophia Woods, n/OSH

psyche could not be fooled or tampered with. Now I know being a rector is temporary, being a priest is not. Postulant, novice, sister (if I get that far), I am a priest in every cell of my body and always will be.

About men, it is true; I gave up looking. I mean, I gave up the imaginative hope of finding romance. I dashed the fondest hopes of my parishioners. I smashed the dearest wishes of my friends. They all love me and want nothing more than my happiness, but the idea of “having someone” is ingrained in their beliefs about where the peak of happiness and the pinnacle of life is found.

And the truth is, I too am equally programmed, and why should I not be?

The whole universe, its beauty, its mystery, its mechanisms for replenishment, seems concocted for the drama of romance. In the switch from rector to monastic this drama doesn’t stop. It may be enhanced and heightened. For, while looking for a partner is ruled out, the chance of “falling in love” – and having to make wrenching choices – is not. Think of Thomas Merton as one example.

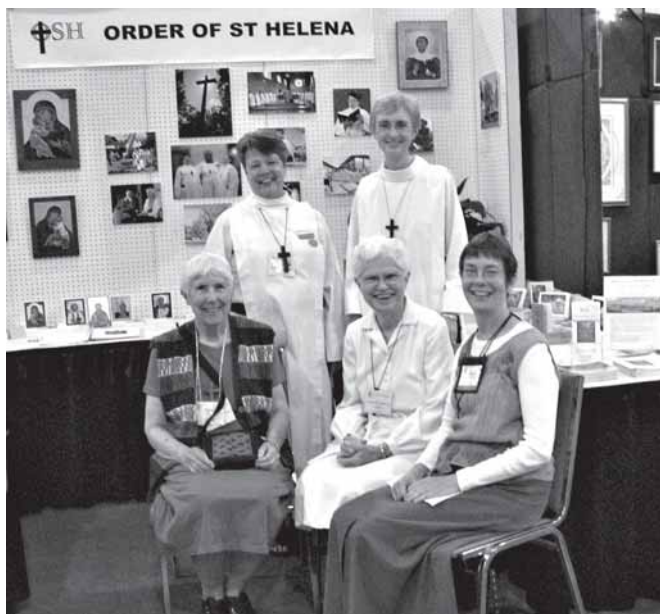
Finally, it is true, I have done a lot of wound licking (wince) in monastic life. As far as being a rector goes, I

don’t know too many people who would disagree that being a rector is one of the hardest jobs on the planet. I loved being the rector of my church, but even the most cautious of priests experiences a fair amount of wounding in the job. My wounds are well healed now.

I left my parish and came to monastic life in response to what I heard within me. The voice I heard did not speak of sacrifice but that a gift awaits me here. And it is true that the switch has brought me to a strange paradox; this choice is the most selfish thing I have done in my life so far. If you have ever thought of making the switch from rector to monastic, please give Sr Ellen Stephen, our vocations director, a call.

IT'S A GIRL!

OSH Sisters at General Convention 2006



Standing: Srs Mary Lois and Ellen Francis
Seated: Srs Cornelia, Cintra Pemberton, Magdalene

Sr Magdalene, Deputy, Diocese of GA: Attending the June 2006 General Convention of the Episcopal Church was my first national convention experience. I felt awestruck and mesmerized by the entire event. As a deputy I had a job to do, and I prayed for wise discernment on some very difficult issues and was joyfully surprised by the palpable power of the Holy Spirit blowing new life through us all.

One memory stands out as my quintessential convention moment. Every day at our massive Eucharist service, the deputies, Episcopal Church women, and bishops were assigned randomly to numbered tables to promote communication and bridge-building in the midst of our diverse views. On the first day the facilitator at each table gently guided us to share our spiritual stories with one another. That afternoon two other women at my table and I felt the honesty and trust bind us together in a camaraderie that would last throughout convention.

One of the women, Elisabeth, told us that at the convention of 2003, she had to draw the line where she knew she could go no further. She said this several times in her story, "I just had to draw the line." At the peace, we hugged each other and after the service, Elisabeth told us she wouldn't be worshipping with us again. She was from the Diocese of Pittsburgh whose bishop had set up a separate worship area for all who needed to worship apart from the Episcopal Church. She said goodbye

and turned and walked away while my new friend and I stood dismayed and heart-sick.

Two days later Elisabeth came back to our table right after the sermon. She tearfully told us, "I had to come back. I believe the three of us bonded and I need to stay here and worship with you." We were overjoyed and tearfully welcomed her back. The point of our worship at convention was to come together at the table of Christ and experience how all are welcome. Our dif-

ferences dissolved as we recognized the enormity and inclusivity of God's abundant love for us all.

Elisabeth stayed with us and we worshipped together for the rest of the ten days. The three of us exchanged addresses and phone numbers and held each other tightly before we parted. We recognized why we need to stay together. We need each other, just as Christ needs us, so that we can help the world learn why we call ourselves Christians.

Sr Ellen Francis, representative at the OSH booth: A personal highlight of the General Convention was my opportunity to testify before a committee on a resolution against war with Iran. During the following lunch break, I spoke about Iran at the consultation booth to thirty or so people who stopped by.

This is the first time in many years that OSH has sponsored its own booth at



convention. I felt thrilled at the positive reception to the icons I had written and displayed and thrilled at the positive reception to our breviary, in BOTH editions, and to the *Saint Helena Psalter*. I so much enjoyed greeting old friends and making many new contacts.

Sr Cornelia, OSH representative at the CAROA booth: The Conference of Anglican Religious Orders in the Americas hosts a booth at convention which highlights contemporary monastic life in the Episcopal Church. In addition to meeting and greeting folks who are curious about such things, I also participated in the daily prayer vigils.

While the big news is, of course, Katharine Jefferts Schori's election as the new presiding bishop, I want to emphasize how impressed I was with the presence of many young adults at convention. They were integrated fully into all aspects of convention. I was impressed by their verbal



contributions during one of the early morning committee meetings. These young women and men, the future of our church, had done their homework and were very articulate.

Sr Mary Lois, representative at the OSH booth: Columbus OH was a great choice for the convention city. It boasts wide clean streets and sidewalks and friendly people. Ellen Francis, Cintra and I spent our days in the OSH booth in the convention center exhibit hall. We made many new friends and reunited with "old" friends. Our new *Saint Helena Breviary, Personal Edition* was well received and a hot seller. To my delight, many strands of prayer beads made by our sisters found new homes. I received a commission for making habit rosaries for the Franciscans. All in all, attending convention felt very rewarding.

Sr Cintra Pemberton, representative at the OSH booth: One of the most important aspects of convention for the

General Convention continued

sisters is always simply “being a presence.” Every day hundreds of people stopped by our booth not only to shop, but to meet the sisters personally (“Are you sisters really Episcopalians? I did not know there were nuns in the Episcopal Church...”) and to ask about other sisters in the community. For the first several days I wore a sticker on my habit saying, “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You,” to stress the fact that yes, we are indeed Episcopal sisters. Every day the OSH booth was a place of welcome and conversation (and sales) with many hugs freely given and received.

My real draw to convention this time was, of course, the breviary. I have been so involved in it for the past six years that I was really excited to see it being offered to the wider church. When Frank Tedeschi from Church Publishing Inc came to our booth with the new *Saint Helena Breviary, Personal Edition* in his hand – it had literally just arrived – it was a very exciting moment. Now the set is complete: we have the *Saint Helena Psalter* and both versions of the *Saint Helena Breviary*. Nothing pleased me more throughout convention than to talk about our worship books (and to sell a copy!) with someone who came by the booth.

Another high point was seeing so many, many friends. I have been an Episcopalian and active in the church all my life, and I visited with friends who date back to my Sunday school days in New Orleans and all the way forward – truly a gift. I also attended hearings and meetings of the Commission on Liturgy and Music. Discussions surrounding developments in liturgical change fascinate me.

Driving back to Augusta with Magdalene, naturally we shared our convention experiences. Since she had been a deputy and I an exhibitor, our experiences of convention were totally different. “It’s as though we were at two different conventions,” Magdalene said, and she was right. We arrived home ultra tired but feeling greatly enriched by the whole experience.

Meanwhile, back at home with Sr Sophia Woods: One minute I was a Sunday driver; the next a maniac. I got the news of Katharine Jefferts Schori’s election results on the car radio, and with instant reflexes, careened off the road onto some slippery new gravel. Thank God I wasn’t on 9W overlooking the Hudson! I began screaming my head off and pounding on the wheel. Thank God I wasn’t at the convent; the sisters would have called Home Land Security!

Since I had met Bishop Schori over a year ago and saw her manner of presiding at the altar, I’d often thought of her and even tried to emulate something of her collected spirit. Since her nomination was announced, I had rooted for her, praying devotedly that she would win. The day after the election, finding a cap with pink embroidered letters, “It’s a girl,” at the hospital gift store in Newburgh, I purchased the cap in honor of the presiding bishop elect, still feeling filled with amazement and thinking: “Many people wanted to see what you see and did not see it.”



Congratulations to Presiding Bishop Elect, Katharine Jefferts Schori!

New OSH Postulants Received!

DEBBY LIVINGSTON



I arrived safely at the Convent of St Helena on Monday of Holy Week, having been delayed for several days in my cross-country journey by treacherous weather conditions. First I went “to the altar of God, of God my exceeding joy” (Ps.43). Here I am, thanks be to God. The sisters greeted me with open arms, Greek pizza, and help unpacking the car. The rest of the week I spent immersed in prayer and silence, which I found to be a wonderful way for a contemplative introvert such as myself to begin this new life.

On April 18, two days after Easter, I was received as a postulant and installed in the choir. The refrain from a Corvallis, Oregon Folklore Society tune kept circling through my mind: “All God’s children got a place in the choir, some sing low, some sing higher. Some sing out loud on the telephone wire, and some just clap their hands or paws or anything they got now!”

There’s something about living in this kind of community, or with this kind of lifestyle, that helps me experience prayer and manual work and outside ministries and study and play – and everything – as being all of a piece, which is one of the things I am seeking in trying this kind of life. I have a very palpable sense of everything being about the giving and receiving of Love. I’m hoping this sense will not only last, but grow and deepen over time.



CLAIRE TENNY

On May 31, the Feast of the Visitation, I was received into the Order of St Helena as a postulant at the Vails Gate convent. Prior to coming to the Order, I served as rector of St Andrew’s Episcopal Church in Grayslake IL in the Diocese of Chicago. This move to St Helena’s has felt like a homecoming for me on many levels. I grew up in Whitestone NY and attended college in Schenectady and medical school in Albany. As I look out at the mountains and drive the winding roads, while much of it is new to me, it all feels familiar. On a deeper level, taking this step to discern my vocation has created a space within myself for a longing I have tried to suppress for quite some time. So there is also a sense of coming home to myself. I am grateful for the warm welcome I have felt here in Vails Gate and look forward to continuing to get to know and learn about all of the members of our community and the religious life itself.



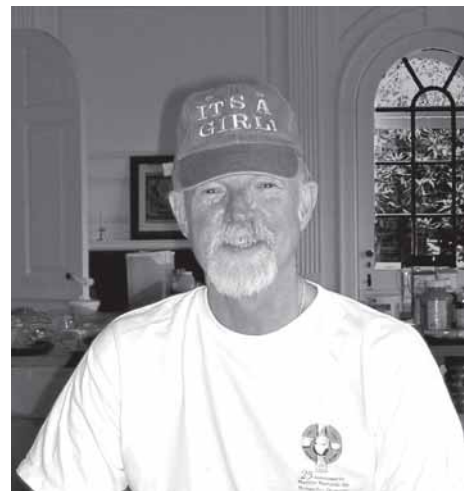
Sr. Jean not shown above. Henry L Atkins Jr photographer.

THE ST HELENA SISTERS

JULY 2006



Postulants, Novices, and Sisters under Annual Vow



The Rev Canon Henry Lee Atkins, Jr
OSH Facilitator

CONVENT PROGRAMS 2006

(See www.osh.org for details and additional 2007 programs.)

Augusta

SEP 30, 9:00-4:00 - *With My Body I Thee Worship: Doing Theology as if the Body Matters*, a seminar with Lee Ann Pingel

OCT 20-22 - *Compassion as Path*, a silent retreat led by Sr Linda Elston, OSH

DEC 8-10 - *Advent Silent Retreat: Preparing for the Light and Warmth of New Life*, led by Sr Rosina Ampah, OSH

JAN 19-21 - *Illuminating Darkness: Befriending Your Shadow*, an experiential workshop led by Thomas Portney

FEB 2-4 - *Hearing the Biblical Word through Midrashim*, a retreat led by the Rt Rev Charles Duval, retired Bishop of Central Gulf Coast Diocese

FEB 23-25 - *Lenten Silent Retreat: When Human Hearts Are Breaking*. A look into the heart of the Eternal led by Sr Carol Andrew, OSH

APR 20-22 - *Art and Spirituality*, a retreat led by Bettina Schuller



Sr Sophia Woods was clothed as a Novice on Friday, July 21, at 1st Vespers of the Feast of St Mary Magdalene. Sophia Woods' daughter, Rachael, was present along with other friends, and a mixture of English and Español was spoken and enjoyed at the cookout that night. Sophia Woods will join Sr Linda in co-editing this newsletter.

Vails Gate

SEP 15-17 - *From Silence the Word Comes Forth, Integrating Buddhist Practices Into Christianity* led by Episcopalians Dr Kathleen G Bishop and the Rev Dr James W Jones

OCT 13-15 - *Associates Weekend: Making Prayerful Choices* led by Sr Cornelia Ransom

NOV 3-5 - *Healing Spirit Emerging*, an experiential weekend of healing practices led by dancer Jeri Baker, drummer Kazi Oliver, Sr Mary Therese, n/OSH, and Sr Linda Elston, OSH

NOV 12 - 50th anniversary celebration of the Life Profession of the Rev Canon Mary Michael Simpson, OSH. 4:30 Holy Eucharist, Vails Gate Chapel, followed by supper. RSVP vailsgateconvent@osh.org or 845-562-0592.

DEC 8-10 - *Advent Retreat: Spiritual Cultivation, A New Look at the Fruits of the Spirit* led by Sr Ellen Stephen, OSH

FEB 23-25 - *Lenten Retreat*

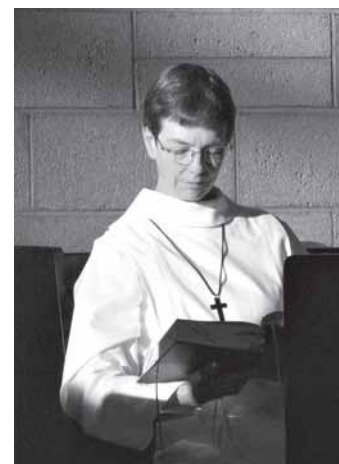
Reproductions are now available of Sr Ellen Francis' icon of Li Tim-Oi, the first woman ordained in the Anglican Communion - in 1944 in China. The 4" x 5" reproductions are mounted on board and laminated. The cost is \$30 plus \$2 shipping for mail orders. The Vails Gate and Augusta convents will also sell these icons onsite. Please contact Ellen Francis for more information or to place an order (sisters@osh.org or 134 East 28th St, NY NY 10016).



NEW PERSONAL EDITION

This just-released publication contains the entire text of the monastic version of the breviary but no music. The Daily Office is set up as in the Book of Common Prayer with the 150 psalms and lectionary printed in order in the back of the book. It includes four ribbon markers. The Personal Edition is available from the Vails Gate and Augusta convents for \$60 plus \$8 shipping or from Church Publishing Inc. Contact CPI at 800-242-1918 or www.churchpublishing.org.

Sr Deborah Magdalene enters The General Theological Seminary in New York City this fall where she will study towards ordination to be a priest in the Episcopal Church. Mag (as we affectionately call her) now lives in the Manhattan convent where she is in walking distance of the seminary. She worked diligently applying for grants and scholarships to cover her expenses this first year, and we are proud that she has been awarded full financial assistance to cover the first year of schooling. Please join us in wishing Mag well and in holding our sister in prayer.



*The Order of St Helena is a religious community for women
in the Anglican Communion, founded in 1945, which witnesses
to a contemporary version of traditional monasticism.*

WE
ARE
EXCITED
ABOUT
OUR
FUTURE!



Pilgrimage to the Holy Land ✠ February 25 - March 10, 2007
led by Sr Cintra Pemberton, OSH

On this 14-day pilgrimage, we walk where Jesus walked, pray where he prayed, visit the places where he performed his miracles, and sail on the same Sea of Galilee that he did. We view the Promised Land from the top of Mount Nebo, as Moses did, and we refresh ourselves at the springs of En Gedi, as David did. We renew our Baptismal Vows beside the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized by John. We visit Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, and Nazareth, where he grew up. We walk the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem as our Lord did on that first Good Friday, and we end our pilgrimage at Emmaus just before returning home.

For more information, contact Sr Cintra Pemberton at 3042 Eagle Drive, Augusta GA 30906 or e-mail cintra@comcast.net.

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