

# saint relena

Volume 24 Number 2 June, 2003

## Journey To Afghanistan, Mission of Peace Sr Ellen Francis, OSH

During the first two weeks of March, I traveled to Kabul, Afghanistan, as part of a Women's Delegation which was sponsored by Global Exchange, a US human rights organization. We stayed in Kabul for ten days. The roots of this trip go deep into my past and will stay with me, I'm sure, for the rest of my life. I lived in Iran in the 1960s and 70s and never thought I would return to the Middle East, yet I was given this incredible gift. I am so grateful to the parishes, individuals and the Diocese of New York, whose donations made my trip possible, and to my OSH sisters and friends who prayed for me while I was away.

The people of Kabul, after 25 years of war, have finally experienced one year of peace. There is still an acute need to improve the educational system and health care, to develop the basic infrastructure of the country, to clear mines and rebuild areas that have been destroyed, to redevelop agriculture and protect the environment, to maintain peace and security throughout the country, and to develop a legal system which will support human rights, especially for women. When we drove around the city of Kabul, we saw ruins which sometimes extended blocks and blocks. Our guide said these buildings had been homes, offices, schools and factories. The effects of war were apparent not only in the physical surroundings, but also in the mental and spiritual health of the people.

We visited one family who lost their home during the 2001 US bombing campaign. Arefeh's husband and several family members were killed, but she and five of her children survived because they were away when the bomb fell. Arefeh told us the story of that day and what she saw when she came home. As she spoke, she began to cry and so did we. We expressed words of support and gave her and her children gifts. She said that we were like her own sisters. Later, our guide told

us that other groups had come to visit Arefeh, but that she had never opened up the way she did with us. We wondered if this may have been because we were all women; I'm sure none of us will ever forget her or her story. Global Exchange is paying Arefeh's rent for the next three years and has bought her a sewing machine so that she can work as a tailor to support her family.

On another day, we visited one of the two orphanages in Kabul. Most of these children do have family whom they visit from time to time. We were told that over a thousand children live at this orphanage. Ten to thirty children live in each room, so we were very concerned about the condition of the buildings and facilities. The biggest problem at the moment is the lack of electricity. They have generators but can afford to turn them on for only two hours each evening. The children live in the orphanage until they finish high school, and their schooling includes university preparation and vocational training. I asked one girl what she hoped to study after high school, and she said that she wants to be a doctor.

Two of our group toured a maternity hospital. The maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan is one of the highest in the world, and seeing this hospital made the reasons clear. We asked which antibiotics they stock in their pharmacy, and the staff answered that they use antibiotics when they have them. Translation: they rarely have antibiotics. Each doctor has one pair of gloves. The building was dark and unsanitary. We watched a newborn baby being washed and saw two mothers holding their newborn children. Outside in the courtyard, many men were standing around; this area was the fathers' waiting room!

Before the USSR invasion of Afghanistan and the years of violence that were to follow, women had advanced

*continued inside*





*A handicrafts fair held in association  
with International Women's Day*

significantly, at least in Kabul. By the 1970s, many women had studied at the university and worked as doctors, teachers, and in other professional roles. All that changed when the Taliban came to power. One woman told us she was beaten by the Taliban just for raising her burka so that she could see to cross the street. Another woman showed us a picture that her child had drawn of a Talib beating a woman in a burka. They spoke to us of begging, of having no security, no freedom of movement and no way to study or earn a living. We heard stories of imprisonment without a fair trial and of giving girls as young as nine years old in marriage.

There are a number of programs in Kabul specifically for women, including micro-computer lending projects, literacy programs and occupational training. I asked one woman what she was learning, expecting her to say that she was learning to read or learning a craft. Instead, she said, "I want to learn everything!"

In the Shomali Plain north of Kabul, we visited an area that is still being de-mined. The earth was barren, muddy and plain, yet all around were the glorious mountains of the Hindu Kush and tiny yellow flowers that looked like crocus. For us visitors, these flowers represented hope and new life. We experienced hope in the songs and dances and bright traditional dresses of all the women. We saw hope in the lives of women and girls who are now beginning to study and work and claim their rights to a safe and peaceful future. Their expressions of hope were always followed by "Inshallah" or "God willing." In the fragile peace and in the many efforts toward rebuilding their nation, I witnessed the promise of God to bring hope out of despair, joy out of sorrow, life out of death.

*Women in burkas  
walking along the  
Kabul River*



*Arefeh and two of her children*

## ANYWAY

People are often unreasonable, illogical,  
and self-centered;  
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you  
of selfish, ulterior motives;  
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some  
false friends and some true enemies;  
Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank,  
people may cheat you;  
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building,  
someone could destroy overnight;  
Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness,  
they may be jealous;  
Be happy anyway.

The good you do today,  
people will often forget tomorrow;  
Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have,  
and it may never be enough;  
Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis,  
it is between you and God;  
It never was between you and them anyway.

(Engraved on the wall of Mother Teresa's  
home for children in Calcutta)

# Community news and views...

A number of sisters gathered at Vails Gate in February for various meetings. On February 1 the Breviary Committee (**Srs Cintra, Ruth, Ellen Stephen, Carol Andrew, Ann and Linda**) met. Soon after, the Board of Directors (**Srs Ellen Stephen, Cornelia, Carol Andrew, Cintra, June Thomas, Mary Lois and Julia**) convened. The Leadership Council (**Srs Cintra, Ellen Stephen, Rosina, Linda Julian**, and their facilitator, The Rev Canon Henry Lee Atkins) also met. The entire community gathered in late February for its spring Chapter meeting.

In late April, most of the sisters in the New York area attended Trinity Institute in New York City at which Archbishop Rowan Williams, Sr Joan Chittester, Fr Laurence Freeman and Kathleen Norris spoke. The conference title was, "Shaping Holy Lives: Benedictine Spirituality in the Contemporary World."

The first months of 2003 were unusually busy for the Augusta sisters as they completed construction at long last and moved into the renovated facility. (See **saint helena** Vol 24 No 1 April 2003.)

In May **Srs Ann, Mary Lois and Ellen Stephen** attended the spring meeting of the Margaret Hall Foundation in Lexington KY. **Sr Cintra**, also a member of the Board, was unable to attend.

**Sr Veronica** writes: "My work here at Vails Gate has really taken off in full force, and my ministry with St Andrews Church in Beacon NY is going very well. I have a Sunday School class of first and second graders. I have also started teaching a confirmation class every Sunday after service. I have continued my work with Newburgh Ministries and the Roman Catholic sisters there, and I've loved going every Wednesday. In addition to this I've led two retreats for two different groups this quarter. This year, I spent my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday with my sister and friends in Bowie MD. I also spent the New Year with another sister in Yonkers NY and have been in touch with other family and friends.

On April 2, I had the privilege of renewing my Annual Vow in the Vails Gate chapel. Another year under vow means for me continuing opportunity to live my life in the

service of God and with my sisters." In late April, **Sr Veronica** led a retreat at the convent for eight women from a church in New Jersey on the theme, "Women in Prayer," talking about the lives of St Monica, Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Catherine of Siena.

**Sr Linda** spent much of the Epiphany season preparing to teach "The Journey in Faith, Light and Love," a seminar rooted in contemplative Christian spirituality. She presented the workshop locally for St George's, Newburgh NY as a Lenten evening series. **Linda** began the EFM Bible course in January and attended an art and meditation workshop in March. After her first and very cold New York winter (Imagine, snow on April 23!), she is thrilled at the warming weather and enjoys getting outdoors again at last. In May, **Linda** visited the Augusta convent and worked with **Cintra** on the newsletter.

**Sr Ellen Francis** returned safely from Afghanistan the end of March and has given several presentations on her trip in the New York City area. She is also enjoying studying Spanish so that she can offer Sunday supply for Hispanic congregations.

**Sr Ruth** led a weekend mission at Grace Church, Plainfield NJ in mid January. She spent two weeks at the Augusta convent in February, helping to put the library back in functioning order after its being packed away for eight years. In March, she attended the funeral and burial of OSH Associate The Rev. Linda Strohmer. **Ruth** said, "Even though it was Lent, the service was the most joyous funeral service in which I have ever participated."

After three years in Vails Gate, **Sr Julia Carol** moved to the Manhattan convent on April 25. New York City will be quite a change from all of the green that **Julia** has gardened these past few years. She is looking forward to the new experience of living in another household and starting a new ministry. It is with great sadness that **Sr Julia** ends her work at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Newburgh NY. On April 22, her ESL students gave her a wonderful going away party filled with good food, music, conversation and dance.

In January, **Sr Barbara Lee** coordinated a crafts workshop for the Partners for Nurture Christian Education Conference at Trinity Lutheran College in Issaquah WA. She continues her ministry of preparing weekly suppers for "The Way," an adult faith formation program, and for "Bread for the Journey," the Wednesday children's education and music program at Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church in Seattle. There with Pastor Paul Hoffman she team-taught an intergenerational session on the Lord's Prayer. In March she prepared the luncheon for a Bread for the World Conference at University Christian Church, Seattle. **Sr Barbara Lee** also does volunteer work with several programs that provide services for the homeless. As a member of the Diocesan Spanish-speaking Ministry Committee, she assisted with two workshops at the annual Diocese of Olympia Ministry Resource Day in April.

In January, **Sr Ellen Stephen** made an official visitation to the convent in Augusta and was pleased to be there as sisters saw the end of major renovation work. She helped reshelve library books and kitchen supplies. She had a visit in NYC with a good friend from Seattle and with him, visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Intrepid Aircraft Carrier Museum and other attractions in Manhattan. In March **Ellen Stephen** conducted the Lenten Retreat at the Vails Gate convent. Later in the month she attended Solemn Evensong at the Cathedral of St John the Divine NYC, at which Bishop Paul Moore preached and received an honorary degree from Bard College for his work in peace and justice. This degree had been awarded only once before—to Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.

In April **Ellen Stephen** traveled to New Orleans for her 55<sup>th</sup> high school reunion. An added bonus was her stay with a cousin there. In New Orleans she had a lovely day's visit with her aunt and aunt's husband in Gretna, and they ended the day with a family dinner at Commander's Restaurant.

**Ellen Stephen** has had brief visits and conferences with community building contacts and friends in Connecticut and Manhattan. In May after attending the



*Sr Julia Carol renews her Annual Vow in the Vails Gate chapel*



*Srs Barbara Lee and Ruth visiting with Associates during a recent trip to Seattle*



*Sr Linda with friends from Texas after her clothing as a novice*

Margaret Hall Foundation meeting, **Ellen Stephen** had dinner with former OSH novice Victoria Scarborough.

**Sr Mary Lois** continues her work at St Bartholomew's Church in New York City. She recently visited her sister in Savannah GA and her son in South Carolina. She enjoyed a few days of vacation on St Simon's Island GA.

**Sr Linda Julian** has completed four years of study at the Westchester Institute and continues to work under supervision toward final graduation. She maintains her practice of therapy and spiritual direction in Manhattan and her work as Minister of Vocations for the Order.

**Sr Cornelia** continues her ministry of spiritual direction at General Theological Seminary in NYC and at Vails Gate. She was on the Direction Team of the five-day Lenten retreat held at Holy Cross Monastery, West Park NY. She is very active in the Church of Our Savior in Chinatown NYC where she has been elected to the vestry. Recently she led a Lenten quiet day for this group. She attended a wonderful family reunion on Long Island NY. The occasion was her cousin's 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

**Sr Magdalene** moved to the Georgia household on January 17, just in time for a snowstorm (!) in Augusta and a baby shower for her very pregnant daughter Melissa who lives in Athens GA. Magdalene is now the proud "Gran" of Allison Ryan Kurtz, born February 15.

**Magdalene** leads a Quiet Day at St Gregory the Great Episcopal Church, Athens, on the first Saturday of every month, then gets to babysit while the new parents take a night out on the town. On April 5 she led a retreat entitled, "Finding Love in The Desert," for Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary wives. In her meditations, **Magdalene** explored the three temptations of Christ from the perspective of love.

The big news in the life of **Sr Ann Prentice** is the birth of granddaughter Lydia Lena Schultz to Ann's son and daughter-in-law, Charles and Jayne. Pictures of Lydia have been a welcome counterpoint to war photos everywhere. **Ann** shared a speaking engagement with Marist Brother Brice Byczynski at West Point in January, talking to the cadets about spiritual direction. Later that month, she led an overnight retreat for the women of St Paul's Episcopal Church, Albany NY at St Joseph's Retreat Center run by the (RC) Holy Cross Brothers.

In March **Ann** led a quiet day on "The Annunciation" at St Simon the Cyrenean Episcopal Church, New Rochelle NY for the women of St Mary's Guild. **Ann** continues her work of spiritual direction and editing the new breviary materials as well as oversight of the chapel. She has attended recent workshops and symposia on various aspects of spirituality.

**Sr June Thomas** attended Trinity Institute in New York City at the end of April. She also participated in the Orange County Classic Choral Society's performance of works by Bach, Beethoven and Bernstein.



*Sr Magdalene and new granddaughter Allison*



*Sr Ann with new granddaughter Lydia*



*Srs Magdalene, Linda and Elsie enjoying community hour in Augusta*

**Sr Mary Michael** writes: "Much of my life is routine, maintaining my practice, attending bible study and community meetings at the convent on 28<sup>th</sup> Street, professional meetings in Westchester County, a weekly celebration of the Eucharist at Good Shepherd NYC, and a monthly retreat at Vails Gate. I was at Vails Gate for the Triduum, and **Sr Ellen Francis** and I shared presiding at Holy Week services. The only change in my routine is an increased involvement with Good Shepherd parish and the coming of a new interim rector who is instituting exciting changes and new programs."

**Sr Clare** visited her sister in New Orleans in November and got to see other members of the family and some of the friends that she still has there. She will be going to a family reunion at Gulf Shores AL in June.

**Sr Elsie** says that it is wonderful to be finally settled into her own office after moving three different times and having to cope with her computer in the TV room and all her files in her bedroom. She enjoys working in the remodeled kitchen where she can make muffins for breakfast and bake chocolate chip cookies.

**Elsie** spent two months in Seattle with her daughters while the guest house was closed from November until January. Her sons joined her in Seattle for Christmas, and it was the first time in over ten years that she enjoyed all four children together. She is looking forward to a family reunion in June with her own children and most of her mother's ten grandchildren at the home of a nephew on the Chesapeake Bay MD.

**Sr Cintra Pemberton** had a bad accident on February 7, falling and breaking several bones in her left wrist and arm. In spite of being thus hampered, she continued working on the revisions to the breviary and was coordinated the Quiet Garden project at the Augusta convent. Recently **Cintra** joined the Augusta Choral Society. A real treat for her was a visit from her son John Austin and her daughter Pemmie Sheasby who stayed at the convent over Palm Sunday weekend and attended the Augusta National (Masters) Golf Tournament as the guests of Mrs Laforest Myer of Augusta.

During Easter week the six Augusta sisters (**Clare, Carol Andrew, Cintra Pemberton, Elsie, Rosina and Magdalene**) shared an evening meal with the two Melchite (Eastern Orthodox) sisters (Vasilia and Vladimira) who have recently moved to Augusta. It was an evening of rich ecumenical exchange.

**Sr Benedicta** has been rejoicing in a new great nephew, David Augustus Sender. He has glowing copper-red hair and a happy disposition. His parents Jonathan and Carla are delighted at starting a family and have already brought him up to the Vails Gate convent for the sisters' enjoyment. David's grandfather Ramon flew east to welcome him also, and there was a family gathering and celebration. In February, **Benedicta** spent her vacation in New Jersey at the house of her younger brother Emmanuel and his wife Irene. Irene also enjoyed a brief visit at the convent.

Mercy is like the mystery of forgiveness. By definition, mercy and forgiveness are unearned, undeserved, not owed. If it isn't all three, it won't be experienced as mercy. If you think people *have* to be merciful, or on the other hand, try to earn mercy, you've lost the mystery of mercy and forgiveness. *I believe with all my heart that mercy and forgiveness are the whole gospel.*

## Blessed

The *Benedictus* (Luke 1:68-79) says you will have knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sin. The experience of forgiveness or mercy is the experience of a magnanimous God who loves out of total gratuitousness. There's no tit for tat, no buying and selling in the Temple. That is the symbolism of Jesus kicking over the tables: the buying and selling of God is over. One cannot buy and sell God by worthiness, by achievement, by obeying commandments. Salvation is God's loving-kindness, a loving-kindness that is "forever." Read Psalm 136 for an ecstatic description.

You don't know mercy until you've really needed it. As Thomas Merton once said, "Mercy within mercy, within mercy." It's as if we collapse into deeper nets of acceptance, deeper nets of being enclosed and finally find we're in a net we can't fall out of. We are captured by grace. Only after much mistrust and testing do we accept that we are accepted.

I once saw God's mercy as patient, benevolent tolerance, a kind of grudging forgiveness. But now mercy has become for me God's very self-understanding, a loving allowing, a willing breaking of the rules by the one who made the rules—a wink and a smile, a firm and joyful taking of our hand while we clutch at our sins and gaze at God in desire and disbelief. So many things have become signs for me of this abundant mercy, not grudgingly extended, but patiently offered—to the

Church, to this age, to each of us. As we grow older, it almost takes more and more humility to receive the mercy of God.

Mercy is a way to describe the mystery of forgiveness. More than a description of something God does now and then, mercy is who-God-is. According to Jesus, "Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice" (*Matthew* 9:13; 12:7). The word is *hesed* in Hebrew, "the steadfast enduring love which is unbreakable." Sometimes the word is translated as "loving-kindness" or "covenant love." God has made a covenant with creation and will never break the divine side of the covenant.

It's only broken from our side. God's love is steadfast. It is written in the divine image within us. It's given, it sits there. We are the ones who instead clutch at our sins and beat ourselves instead of surrendering to the divine mercy. That refusal to be forgiven is a

## are the

form of pride. It is saying, "I'm better than mercy. I'm only going to accept it when I'm worthy and can preserve my (so-called) self-esteem." Only the humble person, the little one, can live *in* and *after* mercy.

The mystery of forgiveness is God's ultimate entry into powerlessness. Look at the times when you have withheld forgiveness. It's always your final attempt to hold a claim over the one you won't forgive. It's the way we finally hold onto power, to seek the moral high ground over another person. I will hold you in unforgiveness, and you're going to know it just by my coldness, by my not looking at you, by my refusal to smile, or whatever. Oh, we do it subtly to maintain our sense of superiority. Nonforgiveness is a form of power over another person, a way to manipulate, shame, control and diminish another. God in Jesus refuses all such power.

If Jesus is the revelation of what is going on inside the eternal God (see

*Colossians* 1:15), which is the core of Christian faith, then we are forced to conclude that God is very humble. That is amazing, difficult to imagine. Sometimes I think I could just stop and meditate on that for the rest of my life. This God seems never to hold rightful claims against us. Abdicating what we thought was the proper role of God, this God "has thrust all my sins behind his back" (*Isaiah* 38:17b).

We do not attain anything by our own holiness but by ten thousand surrenders to mercy. A lifetime of received forgiveness allows you to *become* mercy: that's the Beatitude. You become forgiveness because it's the only thing that makes sense to you, the only thing that's alive within you. Mercy becomes your energy, your meaning. Perhaps we are finally enlightened and free when we can both receive it and give it away—without payment or punishment.

Meditate, if you will, on this frontispiece I wrote for my book, *Near Occasions of Grace*:

*When grace is a punishment for you, you are in hell.*

*When grace and punishment are fighting within you, you are in purgatory.*

*When grace is received without payment or punishment, you are in heaven.*

*merciful;  
they  
shall have  
mercy  
shown  
to them.*

*Matthew* 5:7

(Excerpt from *Jesus' Plan for A New World, The Sermon on the Mount* by Richard Rohr)

# saint helena

Volume 24 No 2, June, 2003

PERIODICALS  
POSTAGE PAID AT  
NEWBURGH, NY  
AND OTHER  
OFFICES

*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.*

*Mission of  
Peace in  
Afghanistan*



*Dorothy, Sr Rosina, Moira, Fanny, and Rosina Edmund  
in front of Twir Nyame, "Lean Upon God" house*



*Fanny, Moira and Dorothy pray the Daily Office together*

Ghanaians Sheila Fanny Moses-Fynn, Dorothy Shella Atampugre, Moira Atampugre and Rosina Ama Edmund have been accepted to enter the Order of St Helena, in spite of visa problems preventing their traveling to the US. Last winter, Sister Rosina spent two months with them in Ghana and next November returns to Ghana for a year's extended service. While there, she will officially receive these women as postulants, and after six months if all goes well, will clothe them as novices. At that point the Order will again apply for visas in hope that the novices will be able to come to the US and continue trying their vocations.

~ Poetry for The Beauty of The Earth ~

The **saint helena** staff is hoping to create a newsletter issue featuring nature poetry written by Associates and sisters. If you write and submit a short-to-medium length poem about the natural world, we will be happy to consider it for publication in a poetry issue. Email your poems to [convent@bestweb.net](mailto:convent@bestweb.net) or snail mail them to Sister Linda Elston at the Vails Gate house with an illustrating photo or recent photo of yourself. Many thanks!

CONVENT OF ST HELENA  
P.O.Box 426 (701 Blooming Grove Turnpike)  
Vails Gate, NY 12584-0426  
phone 845-562-0592; fax 845-569-7051  
e-mail: [convent@bestweb.net](mailto:convent@bestweb.net)

CONVENT OF ST HELENA  
P.O.Box 5645 (3042 Eagle Drive)  
Augusta, GA 30916-5645  
phone 706-798-5201; fax 706-796-0079  
e-mail: [conventofsthelena@comcast.net](mailto:conventofsthelena@comcast.net)

CONVENT OF ST HELENA  
134 East 28th Street (bet Lexington and Third)  
New York, NY 10016-8156  
phone 212-889-1124; fax 212-779-4009  
e-mail: [ljulian@ix.netcom.com](mailto:ljulian@ix.netcom.com)

VISIT OUR WEB SITE: [www.osh.org](http://www.osh.org)