

The Front Runner

Advent advice to the wise: prepare yourself for change! The Gospel begins with the bold tone of the otherwise humble Baptist, and in this issue, we are telling our humble stories with a new, bold tone.

Always, we ask, what's the point?

Two thousand years ago, John prepared the way for a Savior. We want to tell you about the Savior too, the One abiding at the center of our lives.

Our hope is that you find this Advent issue a good read, full of good news. Let us know how you think we've done! Write to Sr Sophia Woods at Vails Gate or sophiawds@yahoo.com.

**Inside this
 "Augusta Convent" issue:**

Two new sisters in Augusta	2
No greater love	2
Compassion, Yankee style	3
Our Clare of Assisi	3
2 stories from younger days	3
Programs & announcements	4
A will, a way, & a labyrinth	5

*Story Editor: Sr Sophia Woods, n/OSH
 Copy Editors: Srs Linda Elston
 and Ann Prentice, OSH
 Consultant: Sr Mary Lois, OSH*



Icon by Carol Perry, Waco TX

**DEUS DE DEO,
 LUMEN DE LUMINE**

by Sr Linda Elston, OSH

How did the rose
 ever open its heart
 and give to this world
 all its beauty?

It felt the encouragement of Light
 against its being.
 Otherwise we all remain
 too frightened.
 (Hafiz)

Two summers ago, my friend Da'Anna told me of her experience while praying with an icon of Mary. As Da'Anna looked at Mary and Mary looked at her, Mary beckoned to her saying, "It is safe all the way in."

As a giver of healing touch and reiki, I also receive energy work. While receiving energy work in a healing touch class 18 months ago, I saw a woman like the angel above, offering me healing through her hands. Then, two months ago during a reiki session, She who I now call *Theosophia*, Divine Wisdom, gifted me with another heart-vision. I was both witness to and participant in this experience which I offer to you, our readers, as an Advent gift.



A strong, masculine hand passes over an expanse of water, smoothing the water's surface as if to say, "Sssshh, quiet now, no thinking." Feminine presence fills the night as two haloed guides lead me to an ancient hill. I peer into the hill and move into the earth layer by layer. As I approach earth's center, I see glowing brightly in the center chamber a tiny yet vibrant candle flame. The flame is bright, so incredibly bright. The entire chamber radiates light.

The praying hands of many women surround the light, and the essence of the night becomes strong, silent worship and praise.

Suddenly the chamber opens into a cavern made of clean straw. Pale yellow straw everywhere, ceiling, walls, floor – and crib – all blazing with light. As I move in closer, I see that this is the place and time of my own birth. Women and ministering spirits – all female and all light – midwife me onto the planet. The sense of the holy grows as light becomes newborn me.

**In the womb of Sophia lives Light.
 Her name is Linda.
 Her name is You.**



My immediate response to this gift was gratitude and amazement. Gratitude for experiencing heartfelt reverence and worship in the Divine Presence. What a relief to *know* of the ongoing praise in my inner being when for years, my outer experience of worship has felt so dry. And stunned amazement that what the mystics tell me *really is true* – that our origin is *in* Light! For days after this experience, I found myself subconsciously chanting from Psalm 110, "Royal state has been yours from the day of your birth; in the beauty of holiness have I begotten you, like dew from the womb of the morning." I even attempted to draw the experience, but no painter of light am I. I turned instead to poem-making.

Time passed, and it was not until asked to print this story in the *saint helena* that I fortuitously began to reflect on it again. The most important thing I am learning right now is this: I

THE GATHERING

by
Sr Mary
Therese,
n/OSH

When people's lives turn upside down or when they exhaust all their ways to achieve their hopes, dreams and wishes, they often seek me out. I hear their stories; with all my senses I feel their spirit: "Don't kill me! Hold me! Don't let me be pushed off this precipice into death!"

Although some transformational healing work can be done one-on-one, most of the time it must also include work in the non-material realm (ie, cultural archetypal energies); and this work needs participant witnesses. That is why I say, "Some work can only be done in community!"

Who will be of service? I call through prayer for individuals living in this world and in the next, for relevant cultural

archetypes (such as Theosophia or Archangel Gabriel) and for the presence of the natural world, literally or symbolically. I invite them to come together in circle for a "gathering." The gathering is a type of "medicine," and everything about it is a sacred work of prayer.

We listen to each other's stories with our whole beings fully alert and open to the Presence of God's Spirit. We enter corporately into an adventure of discovery for the gifts of medicine sent by God. Through being willing to share medicine such as this with others, I have discovered my own heart.

[Editor's note: Sr Mary Therese is the descendant of European, African, and Native American peoples. She honors her heritage of medicine ways by sharing them with others. Her motto is: "I live to share the wisdom of the ages within the Heart of Compassion, Jesus Christ, the Presence of God among us."]

A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

by
Sr Veronica,
OSH

After a woman comes to join us, she is required to live for a time in a second convent before taking life vows. So, in the summer of 2003, I left Augusta for Vails Gate without knowing how long my time there would be. I longed to return to Augusta, but it did not happen.

Then recently I received a call from Sr Cintra. "The Augusta household would like you to move here. If you choose to come, we would ask your help with guest ministry and taking care of Sr Clare."

This would have been happy news some years ago because I have a special love for Sr Clare and I wanted to take care of her. But now, I thought of all the ministries I have developed in New York, and I thought of family members living nearby. Behaving like a true monastic, I replied, "I'm going to pray about it."

The next day we celebrated the feast of St Peter and St Paul. I had no idea who would be preaching at Eucharist. That day, a guest preached. In his opening sentence he talked



Srs Mary
Therese
and
Veronica
have
moved to
the
Augusta
convent.

about Peter being led where he did not want to go. And about Jesus asking him, "Do you love me?" And the preacher then said we should remember our commitment to our community. Right there, in my wilderness, God spoke to me to make my community my obligation over every other thing I hold dear.

Sometimes we hear what we don't want to hear, but that may be what God has for us. How should we respond?

FEEL AS I FEEL, SEE AS I SEE

by
Sr Rosina
Ampah, OSH



When I arrived in the US from Ghana in 1978, I read a book about a man leaving his wife for another man. I was shocked! Full of questions, I went to one sister who said, "Don't believe everything you read." Another said, "You should know the truth if you are going to live here." My questions never left me.

Three years later I led a mission in Mississippi. This was unusual for a black woman, and I was told the impact was

great. Summer after summer, I returned. Then one summer when I got off the plane, I felt my spirit – a power – go out of me as I looked at a stranger, a white man standing in the crowd. Tim had come to meet me. Immediately we began discussing spirituality like we were the most intimate of friends. In time, I discovered that even when we were thousands of miles apart, I could feel what he was feeling.

In 1984, Tim asked my help for becoming a monk. He had to get a physical, and I had to return to Ghana. While in Ghana, I heard him crying. When I came back, I learned it was AIDS. He was given three months to live; he lived seven years. Before Tim died, we went to the airport. He asked me to bless him and knelt down while people stared. Tears were streaming down his face and mine. I told him not to be afraid, that God's love is for all; it is for gay people. This is how I began to minister unconditionally to people who are gay.

This memory came to me over and over last night – God saying, "I want you to feel with my feeling and see with my eyes; everything I created is very good!!"



*Catharine Reid and her mom,
Sr Elsie Reid*

TAKE AND EAT

by Sr Sophia Woods, n/OSH

What do you get if you cross a Buddhist and Betty Crocker? You get something like Sister Elsie. Elsie shows an inscrutable face to whatever life throws at her.

What she cannot change, she transcends with chocolate chip cookies baked with monastic precision. After 50 years she still reads the recipe *Lectio* style, opening the cookbook for each batch of cookies. Guests here want them, ask for them and expect them. They eat them and look as if they feel good, safe, loved, and comforted. But it's not southern hospitality; Elsie is a Yankee.

At 16, Elsie lost an eye. At 40, she lost her husband; their eldest of four children was 16. At 54, Elsie came to the convent. She didn't expect to stay, but when she did, she expected things to stay the same. Just about nothing did. But she kept her faith, her pace and her work – for OSH, for Planned Parenthood, for gay rights, for spiritual directors.

Last year a son, Bill, died. Last July a daughter, Mary Bruce, died. Now Elsie is losing her memory. But her cookies are in a tin on the counter. Take and eat. These cookies are baked with the faith of Teresa and Julian: let nothing disturb you, let nothing a'fright you...all will be well.



*Sr Carol Andrew in her early
days with OSH*

REFLECTIONS ON THE MONASTIC OFFICE

by Srs Carol Andrew and Cintra Pemberton, OSH

I began visiting the St Helena sisters at age twelve. When I was in junior high, I memorized the Daily Office hymns in the 1940 hymnal and sang them to myself at the prescribed hours as a way of connecting with the OSH sisters

as well as to God. When I entered the community in 1970 I was surprised to discover that I knew a good deal about singing the Office without ever having been trained. Six years later when Cintra entered the Order, she made me aware of the technicalities I hadn't known – "You mean that squiggle is called a *quilisma* and that telephone thing is a *do clef*?"

Thirty-five years ago I prayed the Office with a pencil in my hand to mark the parts that I felt worth meditating on. Since then I have moved into a more "unfocused" way of praying; I now let the Office roll over me. Different parts may stand out in any particular Office (as in, how many times have I read that line and never noticed?...!). Or I might simply give myself to the rhythm and let it quiet my heart and mind like an extended mantra.

Sometimes I get tired or bored with the Office and need a break, but after about a week's vacation, I begin seriously to miss the rhythm and peace and settledness of being in chapel with others on the monastic journey. My personal prayer still seems to be where my heart is, and if I have a choice I will probably do that rather than an Office. But I can't do without it for long, as though it were my daily bread.

CLARE AND FRANCIS

by Sr Clare, OSH



Sr Clare and good friend Mary Clarkson

As I look back over my life, I've always hoped and prayed and worked for people to live in peace, for families to have jobs, food, clothing, education, and safe homes. My thinking continues to shift as to who will solve the problems of a world where millions of people lack these basic necessities. I do believe that solutions come through people and churches who *act*.

Today is the feast day of St Francis, such an example for us. He lived a revolutionary life, giving up riches to live with, love, and embrace the underserved people of his town. I feel privileged to have known many Francis-like people. Among these are Mary Clarkson and her late husband, Fr Allen Clarkson. They loved children, their own and others'. Fr Clarkson helped found Episcopal Day School in Augusta and initiated that school's integration.

I entered OSH at age 46. Before I decided to enter, Sr Josephine said to me, "You'd better make up your mind before you're in a wheel chair." Now that I'm 98, my goal is to live to be 100. If I make it to 100 and I'm still walking, then I'll think about 102.



Cintra as an acolyte

I grew up as an Episcopalian, and I sang in the junior choir for as far back as I can remember. The *Venite*, *Jubilate*, and the various canticles in Anglican chant are "in my bones."

Beginning when I was eight years old, I went to church camp for five years and there had my first exposure to Compline. We sang the antiphon for the *Nunc dimittis* to the traditional antiphon tune every night, and that prayer haunted me even as a youngster. Later when I was studying music in college, the *Nunc dimittis* was one of the first melodies I worked with in composition.

When I entered OSH in the winter of 1976, I was overwhelmed with awe that I could combine my love of music with my love of liturgy with my love of the Episcopal Church all in one package! Even after 30 years, I don't think those three loves have changed much.

I was – and still am – greatly assisted in singing the Daily Office by the musical gifts of Carol Andrew. She does not have the training and background in music history or theory and composition that I do, but I don't have anywhere near her skill in sight reading and at the piano. It is a joy to lead choir together.



CONVENT PROGRAMS AND SPECIAL EVENTS

(See www.osh.org for details.)

Advent Retreats

VAILS GATE
DEC 8 – 10

Spiritual Cultivation, A New Look at the Fruits of the Spirit
led by Sr Ellen Stephen, OSH

The theme of the retreat is from St Paul's list of spiritual qualities in Galatians 5:22-23. We will consider: "What do love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control *really* mean to us in our own lives today?" The meditations will focus on the proper climate for spiritual cultivation of these "fruits," how we can practice choosing them over tempting opposites, the obstacles we may find in our spiritual cultivation, and a new look at the "fruits" as we might experience them today. \$145 for program, lodging and meals.

AUGUSTA
DEC 8 – 10

Preparing for the Light and Warmth of New Life
led by the Rev Canon Rosina Ampah, OSH

Advent is the time to prepare spiritually and emotionally to welcome God come to us in newness and gentleness. It is a time to look for Christ in the past year, as well as being open to the One who always comes in surprising and life-giving ways. Preparing for Christ's coming opens wide the door for the One who waits for our invitation in order to be present in our lives more and more bountifully. \$160 including lodging, meals and program; \$80 commuters.



OTHER EVENTS AT VAILS GATE

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.

NOV 18 – Sr Deborah Magdalene will make her Life Vow of Religious Profession in the Order of St Helena at 11:00 in the Vails Gate chapel. Reception follows. RSVP vailsgateconvent@osh.org or 845-562-0592.

FEB 23-25 – *Lenten Retreat*

OTHER EVENTS AT AUGUSTA

DEC 31 – 4th Annual New Year's Eve Celebration of Light, 10:30 pm

JAN 19-21 – *Illuminating Darkness: Befriending Your Shadow* led by Thomas Portney, MA/RM

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

FEB 23-25 – Lenten Silent Retreat: *When Human Hearts Are Breaking* led by Sr Carol Andrew, OSH

APR 20-22 – *Art and Spirituality, Connecting with God beyond Words* led by Bettina Schuller

MAY 4-6 – *Being Together, Mother/Daughter weekend* (see pg 5) with Susanne Fincher, Kim Timledge, and Sr Linda Elston, OSH

MAY 17 – *Ascension Day Eucharist*, the Rev Margaret Guenther, celebrant and preacher. **MAY 18-20** – *Thinking Together about Spiritual Direction: Reclaiming an Ancient Ministry for the 21st Century* led by the Rev Margaret Guenther

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Order of St Helena prints and mails 13,000 newsletter copies each quarter. We are **very grateful** for a \$10 annual contribution from you, when possible, to help offset costs. Please mail your check to Sr Linda Elston, 3042 Eagle Drive, Augusta GA 30906-3326.

Please remember us in your will.

ORDER NOW FOR CHRISTMAS! *The Saint Helena Breviary, Monastic Edition* is one year old this Advent. The *Personal Edition* without music is now available also. Contact Augusta or Vails Gate for *The Saint Helena Breviary, Monastic Edition* (\$75). Contact Church Publishing Inc (churchpublishing.org or 800 242 1918) for *The Saint Helena Breviary, Personal Edition* (\$60) and *The Saint Helena Psalter* (\$20).

NATIONAL NATIVE AMERICAN Youth & Young Adult Gathering, NYC Nov 17–Nov 20. Contact Sr Mary Therese.

MEETING SPACE IN AUGUSTA: For groups needing a meeting place, Ascension House, the 7-bed guesthouse adjacent to the convent, has been remodeled. Living room seats 20+; full kitchen available. Contact our office.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND HOLISTIC HEALING: In Augusta, several sisters are available as spiritual directors and for body/energy healing sessions. By appointment only; please contact our office prior to your visit.

Email augustaconvent@comcast.net if your mailing information changes.

Debby Livingston has chosen to leave OSH; the sisters wish her many blessings.

◆
 Ann
 ◆
 Barbara Lee, Benedicta
 ◆
 Carol Andrew, Cintra, Claire Lofgren
 ◆
 Claire Tenny, Clare, Cornelia, Ellen Francis
 ◆
 Elsie, ES, Jean, June Thomas, Linda Elston
 ◆
 Linda Julian, Magdalene, Mary Lois, Mary Michael
 ◆
 Mary Therese, Rosina, Ruth, Sophia Woods, Veronica
 ◆
 BLESSED ADVENT!
 MERRY CHRISTMAS!
 HAPPY NEW YEAR!

LADIES OF THE LABYRINTH

by Sr Linda Elston, OSH

Sr Magdalene loves walking in the woods, and last year she began to imagine creating an outdoor labyrinth in Augusta. When an unexpected gift of a huge pile of rocks left from outdoor drainage work fired her creative spark, she presented her labyrinth ideas to the Georgia sisters.

Initially, Magdalene's ideas were met with combined enthusiasm and resistance. "Sounds like a great idea but sharp rocks could be dangerous for walkers." Magdalene did not feel deterred and presented a "plan B" – the

One special mother's day weekend
we took a little drive
to the convent in Augusta,
where the Holy Spirit thrives.
Sr Magdalene led our group,
the six of us who were there,
they treated us with a concert
and watched over us with care.

We learned to dance like Sufis
'round a circle as we clapped.
We tried to remember the steps
as the room filled with laughs.
On Saturday we worked together
to build a holy shrine,
a labyrinth, it is called,
to be with the One Divine.

they raced one another up the path with rocks piled high and spilling over.

The "more mature" women worked on the path, digging with trowels, burying rock after rock. As part of this work team, I thought, "This is a great photo op," but mostly I ended up with shots of many backsides!

Everyone had a day's fill of excellent physical labor and hoots of laughter. And guess what? The labyrinth was completed before the Vespers bell rang. As we builders collapsed onto benches to admire



Before



During



After

rocks would be buried "pointy edges down." Everyone agreed. With help from her friend Amy, Magdalene marked with lime seven inwardly spiraling "circuits" around a ten-foot sapling tree growing right in the center.

If only they had more help. Enter: the women coming for our second annual mother/daughter weekend! Mothers and daughters are "pairs" of women who hold one another dear, whether blood related or not. Eager and dressed for work, they hauled wheel-barrow-load after wheel-barrow-load of rocks from near the convent entrance to the labyrinth site. We older women were amazed (jealous) at the energy of two twenty-year-olds as

Armed with shovels and with hoes
we placed the stones around
and filled in the pattern
that was drawn upon the ground.

Sr Linda leapt with joy
as the labyrinth came together.
Sunday morning, it was blessed
in the midst of inclement weather.
Sr Cintra staffed the kitchen
preparing gourmet food galore,
while Sr Elsie's famous cookies
had us begging for more.

My first weekend at the convent
was a wonderful affair,
and spending that weekend with my Mommy
made me thankful I was there.
So if you haven't been to Augusta,
I recommend a visit soon
because the sisters of St Helena,
I believe they hung the moon.

Amy and Dianna Deaderick

our work, Helen, our senior mom, christened the labyrinth with an initiatory walk to the center, honoring God, one another, and a great day of labor and fun.

On Sunday morning, sisters, moms, and daughters sang and processed to the labyrinth in a soft, post-Eucharist rain to bless and speak gratitude for the path. The raindrops cleaned the sand and the rocks beautifully; all was alive and well.

BEING TOGETHER! Look what's up for 2007 Mother/Daughter Weekend, Friday, May 4, through Sunday, May 6. We rejoice in the return of Susanne Fincher (creatingmandalas.com) and Kim Timlege (radiantwellbeing.com) as facilitators for our mandala-making/yoga-dancing weekend (no experience necessary, truly).

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!



continued from page 1

sense I am entering potent transformation to truer experience of my own feminine self, a human being born onto the planet in the feminine image of God. I sense I am entering new and rich experience of God as Theosophia, Lady Wisdom, “feminine” partner to “masculine” source. I sense myself as Wisdom’s child. I am grateful for this third hint, and I am listening!

My spiritual rooting is within the wisdom tradition of Christianity, also called the contemplative or mystical tradition. Five years ago during a healing touch retreat, God invited me to a convent, the traditional abode of women mystics. That was in 2001, so it had been only three years earlier that I’d really begun appreciating women friends and their emotions.

My invitation to a convent was an out-of-the-blue surprise even

though I had been knowingly seeking some sort of closer community with women. I just didn’t know, to quote Sr Ellen Stephen, that when I signed on to the Order of St Helena, I was being invited to “post-doctoral work in love.” And quoting another friend of mine, “I keep telling God I really didn’t sign on for quite this level of commitment!”

Nearly every day now, I feel challenged to learn and to be my own tincture of femininity as I live and work with seven other women. So frequently, difficult emotions arise inside: judgment, pain, anger, hurt, fear.

And so my Advent reflection becomes: Can I in those lightning-quick emotions drop pretenses and be a human being who feels? Do I then have the insight to live my vows as best I’m able? Do I choose Mary’s stance of emptying my being (poverty) so that I may align my heart with Divine Light (chastity) and listen

(obedience) for Theosophia’s guiding wisdom – that Love may be born through me onto the planet?

**My heart is an open chalice
 open to Love's in-pouring
 that like you, Mary,
 I may receive
 and I may then pour.
 It is safe all the way in.**



[Editor's note: The Christian wisdom tradition is rooted in the ancient and perennial wisdom central to all great faiths and in writings from Christianity's first half century (ie, St Paul in I Corinthians 2:6,7). Email Sr Linda at lindaelston@comcast.net to receive a copy of "The Teaching and Practice of the Wisdom Tradition" by Dr Lynn C Bauman. Also see contemplative.org and praxisofprayer.com.]

CONVENT OF ST HELENA
 PO Box 426, Vails Gate NY 12584-0426
 701 Blooming Grove Tpk, New Windsor NY 12553
 phone 845-562-0592; fax 845-569-7051
 vailsgateconvent@osh.org

CONVENT OF ST HELENA
 134 E 28th St (between Lexington & 3rd)
 New York NY 10016-8156
 phone 212-889-1124; fax 212-779-4009

VISIT THE OSH WEB SITE: www.osh.org

CONVENT OF ST HELENA
 3042 Eagle Drive
 Augusta GA 30906-3326
 phone 706-798-5201; fax 706-796-0079
 augustaconvent@comcast.net **NEW!!!!**